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Contributors

Debra Rae Cohen is assistant professor of English at the University of South Carolina and author of *Remapping the Home Front: Locating Citizenship in British Women's Great War Fiction*. She is currently coediting a volume of essays on modernism and radio and working on a book on Rebecca West and modernist historiography.
<cohendr@gwm.sc.edu>

Víctor Figueroa is assistant professor of Latin American and Caribbean literatures in the department of romance languages at Wayne State University in Detroit. His articles on José Martí, Alejo Carpentier, C. L. R. James, and Pedro Pietri have appeared in *Latin American Literary Review, Afro-Hispanic Review,* and *SECOLAS Annals.* He has completed a book manuscript on the poetry of Luis Palés Matos, Aimé Césaire, and Derek Walcott, and is currently studying pan-Caribbean literary representations of the Haitian Revolution.
<an7664@wayne.edu>

Derek Furr is assistant professor of literature in the Bard College Master of Arts in Teaching program. He is writing a collection of essays on poetry readings and the recorded poetry archive. <furr@bard.edu>

Rachel Hollander is assistant professor of English at St. John's University in New York. This article is drawn from the final chapter of a work in progress on ethics in the turn-of-the-century British novel.
<hollanr1@stjohns.edu>

Susan Rosenbaum is associate professor of English at the University of Georgia, specializing in twentieth-century American poetry. She is the author of *Professing Sincerity: Modern Lyric Poetry, Commercial Culture, and the Crisis in Reading.* <srosenb@uga.edu>

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Contributors

Alan Ackerman is associate professor in the English department at the University of Toronto. He is the author of *The Portable Theater: American Literature and the Nineteenth-Century Stage,* coeditor with Martin Puchner of *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage,* and editor of the journal *Modern Drama.* <alan.ackerman@utoronto.ca>

Jonathan Greenberg is assistant professor of English at Montclair State University, where he teaches courses in British literature, modernism, and literary theory. His article on Evelyn Waugh's *Black Mischief* recently appeared in the online journal *Modernist Cultures.* He is working on a project about the place of Darwin in twentieth-century literature and culture. <greenbergj@mail.montclair.edu>

Steve McCaffery is the author of over 25 volumes of poetry, theory, and criticism, including *Prior to Meaning: The Protosemantic and Poetics* and *The Basho Variations.* A new volume of poetry, *Slightly Left of Thinking,* is due out this year. He is David Gray Professor of Poetry and Letters at the State University of New York at Buffalo. <stevemcc@buffalo.edu>

Scott McCracken is professor of English at Keele University, England. His latest book is *Masculinities, Modernist Fiction, and the Urban Public Sphere.* <s.mccracken@keele.ac.uk>

Ella Zohar Ophir is assistant professor of English at the University of Saskatchewan. Her research focuses on British and American modernism. She has published papers on Wallace Stevens, Wyndham Lewis, Laura Riding, and modernist engagements with everyday life. She is now working on a study of language, power, and inarticulateness in literary modernism and early film. <e.ophir@usask.ca>

Benjamin Schreier is Malvin and Lea Bank Postdoctoral Fellow in Jewish American Literature at Penn State University. His publications include *Studies in Irreversibility: Texts and Contexts,* of which he is the editor, and articles on Delmore Schwartz and Philip Roth. He is currently completing *The Power of Negative Thinking: Cynicism and the*

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Contributors

Rachel Adams is associate professor of English and American studies at Columbia University. She is the author of *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* and the forthcoming book *Foreign Relations: Cultures of the North American Continent.* <rea15@columbia.edu>

Timothy Bewes is associate professor of English at Brown University. His most recent book is *Reification, or The Anxiety of Late Capitalism.* He is currently working on a book titled *The Event of Shame: Literature After Colonialism.* <bewes@brown.edu>

Samuel Cohen is assistant professor of English at the University of Missouri–Columbia, where he teaches twentieth-century American literature and literary theory. His essay "Triumph and Trauma: *In the Lake of the Woods* and History" is in the Spring 2007 *Clio.* He is currently working on a book titled *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s.* <cohenss@missouri.edu>

Paul Giles is professor of American literature and director of the Rothermere American Institute at the University of Oxford. His most recent book is *Atlantic Republic: The American Tradition in English Literature.* <paul.giles@rai.ox.ac.>

Andrew Hoberek is associate professor of English at the University of Missouri–Columbia. He is the author of *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post–World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work* and is currently at work on a new book about US fiction and foreign policy from 1960 to the present. <HoberekA@missouri.edu>

Delia C. Konzett is assistant professor of English, film, and American studies at the University of New Hampshire. She is the author of *Ethnic Modernisms: The Aesthetics of Dislocation in Anzia Yezierska, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jean Rhys* and numerous essays on ethnicity in film and literature. <delia.konzett@unh.edu>

Sean McCann is professor of English at Wesleyan University. He is the author of *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and*

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Contributors

Stuart Allen teaches English at Auburn. He has published articles on Wordsworth, romanticism, and aesthetics, and is currently completing a book provisionally titled *Wordsworth, Whiggism, and Critical Poetics.* <stuartjamesallen@gmail.com>

Roger Bellin is a doctoral candidate in English at Princeton. His dissertation explores the American Transcendentalists' alternatives to argument or dispute as a mode of thought. An article on André Breton's *Mad Love* recently appeared in *Journal of Modern Literature.*

Robert Boyers is editor of the quarterly *Salmagundi,* director of the New York State Summer Writers Institute, and professor of English at Skidmore College. His most recent books are *The Dictator's Dictation: The Politics of Novels and Novelists* and *Excitable Women, Damaged Men,* a book of short stories. <rboyers@skidmore.edu>

Daniel Hannah is assistant professor at Lakehead University, where he teaches American and romantic literature. His essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Journal of Modern Literature, Blackwell's Literature Compass, Conradiana,* and *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature,* and he has forthcoming contributions in critical volumes on Henry James. He is currently working on a monograph titled *Henry James, Impressionism, and the Public.* <dhannah@lakeheadu.ca>

Helen Kapstein is assistant professor of English at John Jay College, CUNY. Her areas of interest include postcolonial and contemporary British literatures, cultural and media studies, and southern African literature and culture. Her current book project looks at tourism in postcolonial literature and culture. <hkapstein@gmail.com>

Matthew Mutter is a doctoral student in English at Yale. He has an essay forthcoming on Ralph Waldo Emerson and secularization, and is currently working on a study of religion and secularization in the poetry and aesthetics of George Santayana, Wallace Stevens, and W. H. Auden. <matthew.mutter@yale.edu>

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Nicole L. Sparling is working on a dissertation at the department of comparative literature at the Pennsylvania State University titled "Troubling the Womb: The Poetics and Politics of Sexual (Re)production in the Americas." She has an article forthcoming in the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Litterature Comparée.* <nls183@psu.edu>

Irene Tucker is associate professor of English at the University of California, Irvine. She is the author of *A Probable State: The Novel, the Contract, and the Jews* and is currently completing a project that examines the intersections of race, medicine, public opinion, and literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. <irenet@uci.edu>

Submissions

Twentieth-Century Literature welcomes the submission of new scholarly essays on any aspect of literature written in the twentieth century. Essays should be prepared in accordance with the *MLA Style Manual,* 2nd ed. Send your essay as an e-mail attachment to Twentieth-Century. Literature@Hofstra.edu. Or mail three hard copies to Twentieth-Century Literature, 107 Hofstra University, Hempstead NY 11549-1070. Include a self-addressed, stamped envelope for return.

Twentieth-Century Literature also invites reviews of recent books of scholarship and criticism focusing on twentieth-century literature. Reviews should be 5–12 typed pages, MLA style. Please query one of the coeditors before submission: James Berger <engjab@hofstra.edu> or Anita Patterson <apatters@bu.edu>.

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Call for papers: Academic orthodoxies

Twentieth-Century Literature seeks essays for a special issue on professional orthodoxies in the academy. We invite essays that explore the ways in which our academic culture shapes intellectual inquiry and affective worlds for both faculty and students. Essays may take up such concerns as theoretical canons and their consequences for how ideas are ranked and valued; the impact of professionalized vocabularies on the inner lives of academicians and our students; issues of intellectual freedom broadly considered; the conditions for scholarship and teaching at politically conservative or religiously oriented institutions of learning; the anxieties surrounding humanistic or liberal approaches within mainstream literary scholarship and within institutions; the ways in which professionalization affects the sense of self and of mission; or the phenomenon of ideological change within the academy. We ask that where possible, submissions include some engagement with twentieth-century literary texts or reflection on the course of twentieth-century studies. We will be happy to consider short essayistic pieces as well as full-length scholarly articles. All viewpoints are welcome. Please send inquiries or submissions to Lisa Ruddick <lruddick@uchicago.edu>.

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Remembering Bishop, Bishop Remembering

Derek Furr

> Far off thou art, but ever nigh;
> I have thee still, and I rejoice;
> I prosper, circled with thy voice;
> I shall not lose thee though I die.
>
> —Tennyson (*In Memoriam* 130: 13–16)

> Nature repeats herself, or almost does:
> repeat, repeat, repeat; revise, revise, revise.
>
> —Bishop ("North Haven," *Poems* 188)

On 1 March 1978 Elizabeth Bishop gave a reading at Harvard in memory of her friend Robert Lowell. Some 18 months later, Bishop died of a stroke, ironically on the night before she was scheduled to read again at Harvard, with poet Mary Lavin. That poetry reading became an unrehearsed tribute to Bishop, and on the following day, 21 October 1979, Bishop's friends and colleagues gathered in the Agassiz Ballroom at Harvard University to remember her. Unfortunately, the reading for Bishop was not recorded. However, Bishop's Lowell commemoration and the 21 October memorial service in her honor were. What Bishop scholars might make of those recorded memorials—what literature scholars might make of such recordings generally—is the subject of my essay.

In the following pages I will examine two forms of poetic memorial as they appear in Bishop's works and reception: the familiar elegy for the poet, a subgenre that Lawrence Lipking, following Mallarmé, has designated the "tombeau" (138); and the memorial service, specifically public services carried out by fellow poets and friends. As I will show in a close analysis of drafts of Bishop's "North Haven," her elegy for Robert Lowell,

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Bishop struggled with the fine balance between loving tribute and critique, accurate representation and artful remembrance—a struggle among artist, text, and memory that actually began in public, when Bishop read at Harvard to commemorate Lowell. I will argue that just as Bishop's commemorative reading was a prelude to her composition of "North Haven," the memorial service for Bishop anticipates her posthumous reception, in which the intersection of her life and poetry has been a principal concern: as Dana Gioia put it in a recent review of two decades of Bishop criticism, "her work responds to, indeed often seems to demand, autobiographical readings" (24) despite her skepticism toward confessional verse. Moreover, I hope to show the value of treating recordings of events such as Bishop's Lowell reading and the memorial service as texts, specifically as annotated selections of a poet's work.

Bishop remembering

In the year following Robert Lowell's death, Elizabeth Bishop offered two public remembrances of the poet and their friendship: a reading at Harvard on 1 March 1978 and the publication of "North Haven," first on illustrated broadside, then in the 11 December 1978 *New Yorker.* I want to compare these two literary events and link them with Bishop's private ruminations on how to remember Lowell in "North Haven." In effect, this series of events constitutes a short chapter of literary history. The theme of the Lowell reading, I will argue, is remembering—we see it in Bishop's choice of poems and her commentary. More to the point, Bishop begins a public dialogue with her late friend on the question of why and how to remember, a question that will be central to "North Haven."

Reading aloud, whether for a poetry reading or a studio recording, had always vexed Bishop. In her first letter to Lowell (14 August 1947) she mentions the "dreadful" results of her being recorded at Harvard, though she jokes about the process—she is "like a fish being angled for with that microphone"—and writes admiringly of Lowell's recordings (*One Art* 147). While Bishop's reading could never be fairly described as "stammering elocution" (Bishop, *Poems* 5), it is often flat and breathless, the latter an effect of asthma brought on by anxiety. The public reading, unlike the studio reading, took away the possibility of revision, and in an academic setting, it exposed the poet to the scrutiny of scholars. Or so Bishop felt:

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> I absolutely hate reading my work aloud under any circumstances. The first time I gave a reading [at Wellesley College, 19 October 1949] I stopped for twenty-six years. Harvard is a terrible place for reading; they are famous for being cold and you feel your voice getting deader and deader. The further west you go, the better the audiences, because they're not showing off. The nicest audience I ever had was children (at the American school in Rio). They asked such good questions, like, Why did you choose this word instead of that. Simple, practical things, which is the way you write, of course. (qtd. in Monteiro 113)

So the circumstances of the Lowell memorial reading must have been particularly dreadful to Bishop: a public reading at Harvard for its most celebrated poet, and for a friend whose significance in Bishop's life could not be overestimated. On the day of the reading, she wrote to Ashley Brown that she "wish[ed] the next two days were over with!" (*One Art* 620). The results of Bishop's "remembering Robert Lowell" reading, however, were hardly dreadful, providing as they did a public prelude to the private ruminations that led to "North Haven."

As planned, Bishop reads a program "half Cal, half me"; though there are twice as many Lowell poems, Bishop reads two of her longest poems and tells a number of anecdotes. The rationale of her choices from among Lowell's vast oeuvre is clear: she offers us Lowell remembering. She begins with two of Lowell's "family elegies" (Ramazani 22) —"Death from Cancer" and "Mary Winslow"—and a poem on dying, "Where the Rainbow Ends." She then reads four poems in which Lowell reflects on his struggles with mental illness, poems with recurring figures of psychic death and resurrection: "Waking in the Blue," "Home after Three Months Away," "Skunk Hour," and "Thanks Offering for a Recovery." Her reading betrays no sign of anxiety about the event; her voice is not shaky or tentative, as it had been in her recordings from the 1940s.[1] But Bishop is not an elocutionist. Her voice is thin and weak, often raspy on this occasion; she is never dramatic. Even when a line of verse seems to call for verve or bite—for example, Lowell's echo in "Skunk Hour" of Milton's Satan, "I myself am hell" (192)—Bishop's delivery is restrained. While there are a number of plausible explanations for Bishop's reading style—her naturally small voice, her reserve, her shyness—of greater interest is the style's effect. When Bishop reads, complex verse becomes conversational, offered in the

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same genuine, unaffected voice as her commentary and anecdotes.

This is significant, it seems to me, because the poetry, as opposed to her running commentary, carries forward the conversation on death and remembering that anticipates "North Haven." Bishop limits her comments primarily to elucidating the sources of poems—information on St. John's Day celebrations, for example, to explain "The Armadillo"—or defining words such as *bibelots* and *azulejos.* Indeed, when Bishop deviates from this strategy, she gets into trouble. She prefaces her reading of the mental illness poems from *Life Studies* with an uncharacteristically interpretive comment:

> And these poems, the first two I'm going to read, are very sad because as you probably all know he had very tragic breakdowns from time to time. But what was wonderful about him was the way he recovered from these things always, and always started writing again, and wrote magnificent poetry very soon afterwards. (Poetry Reading)

Neither "Waking in the Blue" nor "Home after Three Months Away" is "very sad." Indeed, Bishop's conversational style of reading brings out the humor of the lyrics. Her voice lightens noticeably in the ironic third and fourth stanzas of "Waking," where Lowell's fellow inmate at the asylum "swashbuckles about in his birthday suit" and Lowell quips that "There are no Mayflower / screwballs in the Catholic Church." Similarly, Bishop almost laughs at the image of Lowell's daughter helping him with a shave in "Home." But notice Bishop's phrasing in her prefatory comment: "these poems . . . are very sad *because* [emphasis mine]" of what the audience "probably" knows about Lowell's illness and its attendant traumas. Bishop acknowledges that knowing the biographical circumstances here may affect our reception. However, her reading honors the fact that Lowell manages the content of both poems with a keen eye for the humorously absurd and the effectively sentimental.

"Each of Miss Bishop's readings counts," proclaims Monroe Engel when he introduces the poet, and I would argue that what "counts" most at her Lowell reading is her choice of poems rather than her reading itself. Lowell, Engel tells his audience, is a poet "whom we have not yet begun to know how to be without," and as I've suggested, the poems that Bishop has gathered address the problem of being without. The sequence opens with the two elegies for Lowell's Winslow grandparents. In both, precise,

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sometimes unflattering details about the Winslows and their Boston environs are infused into the mythic image of Charon rowing to their bedsides to ferry them to Hades. The Charles flows into the river Acheron; Boston and Lowell's ancestors become part of a "familiarized" classical mythology. Bishop greatly admired what she called Lowell's "family life" poems (*One Art* 361), but his tendency toward the mythopoeic is challenged by the poem with which Bishop closes her reading, "Santarem." There Bishop stands at the "conflux of two great rivers" (185) and rhapsodizes on the "idea of the place." Isn't it like the Garden of Eden, she asks; don't many "literary interpretations" spring readily to mind when the poet dreams of rivers? Such interpretations, she argues, dissolve in the "watery, dazzling dialectic" of the rivers' confluence. If Lowell's mythic narratives anchor memory in classical structures, Bishop's "dazzling" rivers erode the sand beneath them. Memory flows—it is unstable ("watery") and destabilizing ("dazzling").

What, then, will be the nature of poetic remembering? "Santarem" begins "I may be remembering it all wrong" (185): the ethics of accurate representation are often at odds with the demands of art and the friability of memory. As Thomas Travisano has noted (190), Bishop repeatedly calls attention in the poem to the tenuousness of her authority: was it two rivers or four that "sprung / from the Garden of Eden"? Bishop was troubled by Lowell's poetic license in his family life poetry,[2] and even in her commentary during the Lowell reading she cannot resist pointing out examples of, on the one hand, completely accurate representation and, on the other, "exaggeration," as she calls it. Bishop, of course, was not opposed to the artful revision of memory, nor did she hold that the past could be delivered with objective accuracy, as is evident in "North Haven." Rather, her worries about the tension among art, memory, and accuracy are the best evidence of her belief that poetry could matter, that it could affect real people and real lives.

That effect is one subject of "The Armadillo" that seems especially salient in the context of the Lowell reading. In the poem she upbraids the "too pretty, dreamlike mimicry" (104) of the St. John's Day ceremony, and at the Lowell reading she comments that despite its beauty, the practice of sending up flaming prayer balloons often caused damaging fires and fatal accidents. This is a comment she often made about "The Armadillo." But the poem is hardly a Calvinist sermon against excess. On the contrary, it mimes the very beauty that it chastens; it is certainly "dreamlike" when

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a baby rabbit transforms into "a handful of tangible ash / with fixed, ignited eyes" (104), and it is "too pretty" when "the paper chambers flush and fill with light / that comes and goes, like hearts" (103). Beautiful things can cause pain, and "The Armadillo" is itself "too pretty, dream-like mimicry" despite the moral of its final stanzas. By that same token, pain can give rise to beautiful things; out of Lowell's desperation comes "Skunk Hour," a poem dedicated to Bishop and, according to Lowell, inspired by her "Armadillo." Bishop was troubled by the potential grief that Lowell's confessional poetry could cause family and friends, but she was equally persuaded that art depends on the revisiting and revision of painful memories. This is evident in the poems she chose to read at the Lowell commemoration, and it is essential to the development of "North Haven."

Bishop composed "North Haven" during the months following the Lowell service. She often devoted many years to single poems, putting them aside then circling back for more revision, but she focused intensely on "North Haven" over these few months.[3] There are 19 separate drafts, including her last-minute changes on the *New Yorker* proofs. Alluding to Bishop in his study of the modern elegy, Jahan Ramazani has argued that "the 'One Art' of the modern elegy is not transcendence or redemption of loss but immersion in it" (4). If the final version of "North Haven" depicts Bishop immersed in loss, it does so because Bishop herself had moved beyond the loss through the art of writing; her drafts trace memory's textual history, which is to say memory's differentiation in the service of mourning represented.

"North Haven" began as a short sketch in one of Bishop's notebooks; the sketch is undated, so it may have preceded Lowell's death. It shares no language or imagery with the many drafts from the spring and summer of 1978, but its first lines contain the final poem's interest in the intersection of landscape and personal history:

> Before any of our history
> Before any history that we can say
> belongs to us—
>
> picnic-parties took place here—
> clam-bakes!

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> That's all we know about them—
> they liked picnics,
> they liked lobster ("North Haven" mss.)

At the heart of each version of the poem is the question of how the landscape inscribes personal history and how, thereby, meditation on the "blue frontiers of bay," the flowers, and the birds of North Haven conjures memory. In this respect, "North Haven" rests squarely in the tradition of the pastoral elegy, working as it does in what Peter Sacks sees as the "contrast between the idyllic pastoral and the intrusive reality" of a loved one's death (3). The drafts, however, show Bishop moving into the position of observer not only of the pastoral landscape but also of Lowell. Helen Vendler lists among Bishop's poetical "attitudes" a "cold capacity for detachment" ("Poems" 838) and maintains that such an attitude "ensured Bishop's avoidance of closure through certainty or through social solidarity, in favor of closure in questioning, loss, or inscrutability." In "North Haven" Bishop becomes increasingly dispassionate, I would argue, to become more artistic in the rendering of her memory.

Let us assume that Lowell is Bishop's partner in the plural pronouns of the manuscript sketch. *Our, we, us:* the manuscript draft is addressed to Bishop and Lowell as one and sets the stage for a poem about "our history." Compare this to the later, typescript drafts, in which *our* occurs only once. Over the course of revision, Bishop essentially distances herself from Lowell by moving toward a structuring of the poem around its personal pronouns: from *I* to the single *our* of stanza three to the *you* of the final two stanzas. That Bishop had this progression in mind is clear from the poem's drafts. The penultimate stanza, in which "you" tells Bishop about discovering girls, moved several times before settling down in the eighth draft. Thus the elegy creates the illusion of a logic to Bishop's grief. First the "I" observes—the bay, the flowers that hint at Lowell's former presence—then her observation of nature conjures a memory of "our" time at North Haven and leads to the insight that nature "repeats herself, or almost does," an insight that finally brings Lowell ("you") fully into view for the "I" to scrutinize.

Bishop also significantly altered how we would see Lowell in those final stanzas. In the first typescript of the poem, the final stanza began "But you have gone for good, but our / poems stay." Among the changes that Bishop wrote in the margins is "the" to replace "our," again distancing

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the speaker from Lowell. More tellingly, she runs the last sentence through several different variants: "Dear, you can't change," "My dear, you cannot change," "And you, my dear, can't change," and ultimately "Sad friend, you cannot change." The sentimentality of "my dear" is wisely traded for "sad friend," a simple but poignant characterization of Lowell and of her relationship to him. Across all these variants, however, "can" is the helping verb; in death, of course, Lowell is unable to change. But Bishop's combination of present indicative and direct address equally implies that in his essential sadness, Lowell never could change. The "can't" of the final sentence contrasts with the "won't" of the sentence that precedes it. As the drafts show, Bishop was equivocal about whether the "words" (sometimes "poems" in the drafts) "can't" or "won't" change. Critics have noted that Bishop is gently teasing Lowell here for his incessant revision, even after publication. But she is also giving to the "words" a will that, in death, Lowell no longer has; perhaps the words *could* change, the grammar implies, but they won't. Furthermore, by deciding on "words" instead of "poems," Bishop tacitly acknowledges that the poems have a life of their own; in her estimation, the words are fixed, but the poems are fluid. Lowell may be unable to "derange, re-arrange" his poems, but what might the poems do without him?

The answer to that question, I would argue, is a source of anxiety for Bishop, which is evident in the elegy's preoccupation with continuity and change, control and loss of control. It is true that Bishop's gradual shifting to a more dispassionate perspective gives her command of her subject and allows her to critique her "sad friend," however gently; as Herbert Marks writes, "the final line of the poem . . . is poignant but also a bit patronizing, concealing, but only barely, an unnerving hint of triumph" (202). This distancing is particularly apparent in Bishop's revisions of stanza 5, beginning "Years ago, you told me," easily the most worked-over stanza of the poem. Until the latest drafts, its sympathy for Lowell verges on the sentimental, suggesting that life never allowed Lowell to have fun, which one version of the poem describes as an "elemental good." Later drafts and the published version are ironic about Lowell's complicity in his own misery—and, by extension, Bishop's complicity in *hers*. "Fun" is given scare quotes and Bishop is clearly rolling her eyes at the intellectual contempt for it: "('Fun'—it always seemed to leave you at a loss)." You never had much interest in fun, she implies, but that amounts to another loss.

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It is also true, however, that Bishop's increasing control of her language—and her rhetorical claims about change and loss—are contradicted by the poem's the subtext and imagery. As I've noted above, her choice of "words" in the final line raises the question, "but will the *poems* change?" If "revise, revise, revise" was Lowell's refrain in life, just as it was Bishop's in composing the elegy, his death and the poem's publication put an end to revision—but only the revision that the author controls. In the third and fourth stanzas the natural images that Bishop records are first presented as repetitions of the past, signs of its eternal return. But with "almost," Nature's repetitions are revealed as in fact revisions. More importantly, Bishop's vision of them is literally a second seeing; that the buttercups, clover, vetch, etc. have "returned" is an illusion of art. The flowers and birds at North Haven this year are different from the last; this year's sparrow can change his song, but neither he nor his song is necessarily the same as last year's. Lowell has died: he cannot change his poems. Bishop has sent "North Haven" off to the *New Yorker* and can no longer revise it. But Lowell's poems and Bishop's "North Haven" can (will) change over time among readers.

"The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living," writes Auden (81). Bishop's approach to this sentiment is less direct,[4] but I would argue that in "North Haven" she has begun to recognize a characteristic of texts and reading that Fish famously describes in "Interpreting the Variorum": interpretive communities (re)write the text. Bishop knows that her elegy will not simply "repeat"; it will be revised. In her desire to stabilize text and memory, Bishop is drawn toward an illusion, the unending present of lyric time, but pulled back into what Paul DeMan calls "the actual temporality of experience" (225). In the final stanza, death ushers in permanence, but the subtext of much of the poem is that permanence and continuity are illusions—*lyrical* illusions. Nowhere is this clearer than in the opening stanza, which Bishop italicized and set apart from the rest of poem. The stanza suggests timelessness, an eternal present, that in combination with the painterly accuracy of the imagery situates us in an aestheticized, lyrical space. However, this stillness was the result of revise, revise, revise; what "is so still"—the day, the spruce, the bay—changed significantly as the poem developed. So the very landscape of this unmoving island altered as Bishop re-collected it for the purposes of art. What is to prevent the art, the poem, once it passes out of lyrical time and into the "actual temporality of experience," from doing the same?

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Famously, Bishop was slow to make her work public—hesitant to read it aloud, cautious about publishing it before she had exhausted the possibilities of revision. She recognized, though she hesitated to acknowledge, that once a poem entered the public sphere, it began to change. In an interview with George Starbuck near the end of her life, Bishop recalled reading "Roosters" many years after it was published:

> Some friends asked me to read it a year or so ago, and I suddenly realized it sounded like a feminist tract, which it wasn't meant to sound like at all to begin with. So you never know how things are going to get changed around you by the times.
> (qtd. in Monteiro 89)

Poetry, in its mutability over time, is analogous to memory, and no one understood better than Bishop the protean nature of memory—"I may be remembering it all wrong" she announces through "Santarem" at the end of the Lowell reading. "Life and the memory of it" (177), she explains in "Poem," run together in art; she and her uncle may have looked at the same landscape "long enough to memorize it," but landscape and memory are changeable, and Bishop's look at her uncle's painting results in a remaking: the poem. A similar remaking happens in "North Haven," for the Robert Lowell of that poem is an artifact, interpreted by Bishop, up for interpretation now by her readers. It is that revision, the reader's, that Bishop wished to forestall. Indeed, she dreaded it, as she dreaded reading aloud. Offering advice to a young poet, Bishop encouraged her to read all of a non–twentieth-century poet's work, then read all of a modern poet's work, along with the letters of both; but, she claims, "I always ask my writing class NOT to read criticism" (*One Art* 596). Bishop wanted to believe in the permanence of the poem, in the integrity of the object as in itself it really is. "The words won't change," she promises her sad friend, in what we might understand as a white lie. For their meanings, as components of poetry and memory, surely will.

Remembering Bishop

In "At the Fishhouses," Bishop declares that "our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown" (*Poems* 66), dynamic and situated at the same time. Memories, like poems and the island of North Haven, are both "anchored" in specific historical moments and "afloat in the mystic blue"

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(188). When the poet becomes historical—that is to say, when she passes into memory—she takes on the condition of memory and knowledge, which is the condition of text, material in its temporal habitations, variable in its specific meanings. Poet and text are polymorphous, though each new body retains some imprint of the first embodiment. Consequently, reception theorists generally agree that the initial reception of a poet should be given special attention, but that it does not fully delimit the poet's subsequent histories. "The way the work is received by its first public," writes Janusz Slawinski,

> and hence understood, interpreted, evaluated, considered perhaps as unreadable, rejected, or simply unnoticed—determines its primary semantics and demarcates the beginning of its existence in literary history. [But a] text's encounter with its first public is not to be identified with the irreversible "immobilization" of its semantics, or the preempting of its fate. As the work circulates both in time and space among new and different reading publics, its primary semantics undergo modifications that are sometimes far reaching . . . the text gradually acquires new readings and interpretations which somehow follow it on its way among its readers, or on occasion totally insulate it. (522)

I want to extend Slawinski's formulation to include the poet as well as her work, and I want to suggest that despite the constraints of convention, memorial readings and services can be instances of revaluation, signaling a turn in a poet's reception, even as the "main stream of reception history flows by without a sound" (525). In the case of the Bishop service, I certainly cannot claim that what transpired had a direct impact on the subsequent reception; however, as I hope to show, the participants' efforts to offer up an interpretation of Bishop's work and life represent a mode of reception that has, in effect, become the "main stream of [Bishop's] reception history." What I will argue, therefore, is that the memorial and similar events—an open forum on a poet, for example, or the debates surrounding the awarding of a literary prize—offer insight into the shaping of reception, for we become witness to processes analogous to those in Bishop's drafting of "North Haven." Furthermore, as a public event, the memorial archives a greater range of voices than most texts or events to which we would normally turn for reception artifacts. We hear the critics and fellow poets, but we also hear the family, the friends, the congregation.

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What image of Bishop emerges from the Harvard memorial service? To answer this question, we must first decide which aspects of the service are worth attention. There are a number of awkward moments during the course of the hour, some of them humorous. John Ashbery hasn't arrived when it is his turn to speak, so Robert Fitzgerald comes to the podium, clearly agitated, and exclaims, "I'm sorry to be advanced in this way" (Memorial Service). There are problems with the microphone, voices catch and tremble, a siren wails as Helen Vendler reads George Herbert. But more pertinent to Bishop's reception are the hymns, the readings of poetry, and the commentary on her work and personality. In the following pages I will argue first that the content of the service helps inaugurate an important theme in Bishop's posthumous reception; I will then go on to suggest that the readings and commentary create, in effect, an eclectic, annotated Bishop "text."

The service begins and ends in song. Congregation and musicians together contribute four hymns. During her time at the podium, Frani Muser reflects on Bishop's love of hymns, "congregational hymns, rugged American songs like good New England granite," a description that accurately describes a Bishop favorite, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," which occupies a central position in the service just as it does in "At The Fishhouses."[5] What do we make of the prominence of hymns in this otherwise secular service? The question could be asked of Bishop's oeuvre itself, in which Protestant ethics factor significantly, despite Bishop's agnosticism. Muser's "rugged" and "New England granite" suggest an answer. The child in "Sestina," the young Elizabeth in "In the Waiting Room," the melancholic voice at the end of "Over 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance": repeatedly in Bishop's poetry, the cold reality of life is the "element bearable to no mortal" (*Poems* 65), and yet bearing up—being "back in it" (161), fully and with clear vision—is what Bishop's poetry professes. Running parallel with the theme of suffering and perseverance in her poetry is a quality of restraint that manifests in her diction and her personal humility and meets its opposite in her lifelong bout with alcoholism and the guilt that attended it. In diction, as well as the pull and tug between indulgence and restraint, she is most like her favorite poetic precursor, George Herbert. Herbert's and Bishop's Protestantism intersect at the memorial service, as we shall see when we come to Helen Vendler's reading of "Love Unknown." But for the moment, suffice it to say that the hymns are more than mere nods to Protestant ritual. On the

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contrary, they tacitly acknowledge the role of Protestantism in Bishop's personal and poetic development.[6]

Several hands went into the making of the service. Participants include Alice Methfessel, Robert Fitzgerald, Robert Giroux, Anne Hussey, Frani Muser, John Ashbery, Octavio Paz, Frank Bidart, Helen Vendler, and Lloyd Schwartz. The service is loosely structured: each speaker offers comments and a reading, and the quality of delivery and the mood and content of the remembrances are as diverse as the individual interests and biographies of the participants. In their comments, several of the speakers stick to personal anecdotes. Ashbery's recollections are quirky and elusive, centering on two encounters with Bishop at hotels; Muser remarks on admiration for "the Bishop" during their Vassar days; and Giroux tells a poignant story of attending a production of *La Bohème* with his niece. Noting that Bishop had been an opera fan, he recounts a humorous story of attending an opera with Bishop and the Lowells, then ends with the *La Bohème* anecdote. Giroux recalls that his niece cried at the death of Mimi, and when her mother came to pick her up, she was still crying. "What's wrong?" her mother asks.

"Oh mama, I was having such a good time. But Mimi died."

Giroux's representation of Bishop as Mimi, like Bishop's representation of Lowell as her "Sad friend," can be understood as an example of the grief work that Freud identified in the *fort-da* episode and that, subsequently, literary critics have found operative in the elegy. Freud's *fort-da* is an account of a child learning to represent absence through imaginative work. An object or idea over which the child has some control replaces the deceased, but that object does not merely restore presence, it also signifies absence. As Peter Sacks argues, this process, which tells us as much about the mourner as the mourned, is also evident in the elegist's work with tropes and language. We've seen it at work already in Bishop's tributes to Lowell, both at the reading and in the drafts of her elegy. Personal memories become public representations of the poet, whose very work was to represent.

At the memorial service, the connection between Bishop's biography and her poetry is overtly drawn by Helen Vendler. Vendler relates three occasions on which Bishop demonstrated her characteristic "kindness to the young." The stories are simple: Bishop grants an interview to a student newspaper despite the inconvenience it will cause her; she invites a young Radcliffe poet to tea; on the day of her death, she tries to contact a young

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scholar who has confused two of her poems, in order to save him embarrassment. These "nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love," Vendler concludes, show a side of Bishop that is "reflected as well in the poetry, that is [to say] that she knew the emotions of human beings and their sufferings." Vendler's remark anticipates a fundamental assumption of Susan McCabe's treatment of Bishop's "poetics of loss": that "One mourns for life in order to live it, to understand its limits. Elizabeth Bishop knows this. She also knows that writing helps us raise and recall our losses so we can move ahead" (1). Following Vendler and McCabe, I am inclined to augment my reading of "North Haven" and suggest that Bishop's personal knowledge of suffering intensifies her sympathy for Lowell—the sympathy that she painstakingly restrains over the course of drafting the elegy. In the end, "North Haven" is a product of Bishop's campaign for control of her materials—the landscape, Lowell, the words—and of her mourning.

In presenting Bishop as a poet whose life is a window on her work, the memorial service forecasted the shape of things to come in Bishop's critical reception. While there was relatively little published criticism of Bishop before 1980, interest in her life and work increased dramatically shortly thereafter, possibly influenced by the publication of her letters and, as Dana Gioia has argued, the rise of gender and women's studies. A review of Bishop's posthumous reception indicates that, as at the service, Bishop's life—her childhood, her sexuality, her friendships, her travels—has played a significant role in numerous studies of her poetry and influence since the early 80s. This is true of the psychoanalytical criticism of Susan McCabe, of Brett Millier's essay on alcoholism, of David Kalstone's influential *Becoming a Poet,* and of Thomas Travisano's *Midcentury Quartet.* More recently, Kit Fan reads "Crusoe in England" as a "reticently autobiographical poem that explores Bishop's return to Boston after the exile in Brazil" (47), and Timothy Materer examines the autobiographical impulse in Bishop's and James Merrill's poetry.

Remembering Bishop, in short, seems to be a critical part of how we read Bishop. Foucault predicted that the author, as a "function" (119) of our readings of literary discourse, would disappear in light of poststructuralist understandings of culture and meaning; there would be other "systems of constraints" on how we make meaning of text, but the "author" would no longer prove useful. It seems unlikely, however, that the author will disappear so long as we read in order to connect with or

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recollect the writer—a purpose for reading that obviously stands behind commemorations and memorials but is also still implicit in much literary criticism. We may argue about what constitutes the "author" or "poet"—it should become clear soon enough that my own argument is indebted to a Foucauldian understanding of the subject as a discursive construct—but the very act of turning to a Bishop poem *because* it is a Bishop poem assumes that there is something "Bishop" to be constructed in dialogue with that poem—its language, form, ideology, voice. At the Lowell reading, an audience comes to hear "Lowell"; at a Bishop reading, "Bishop." That the body of the poet has passed on seems merely to open up possibilities for the poet to speak.

Balancing the anecdotes at the memorial service are readings of prose and poetry, with occasional commentary on Bishop's poetics, particularly her observational acuity. In effect, the combination of biographical notes, literature, and critical commentary generates a text, an annotated selection of Bishop's work. The text is bound temporally by the historical event, the memorial service; despite its medium, a cassette tape, the text behaves much like a printed memorial edition (for example) of Bishop's work. That is to say, commentary seeks to frame a "reading" of the selected literary pieces, which in turn interact with each other. Following Sharon Cameron in her recent work on Dickinson and Anne Ferry in hers on the nature of the anthology, I want to attend closely to the choice of poetry/prose and to the order of things in the memorial text. For the choice and order are instrumental in the construction of the author—in the remembering of Bishop.

Derived from the service, these would be the contents of the memorial text:

1. "Recipe for Combating Low Spirits" by Sydney Smith
2. Excerpt from final chapter of *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White
3. "Manners (for a Child of 1918)" by Elizabeth Bishop
4. "Twelfth Morning or What You Will" by Elizabeth Bishop
5. "A Miracle for Breakfast" by Elizabeth Bishop
6. "Objectos y Appariciones" by Octavio Paz, with translation by Elizabeth Bishop
7. "Love Unknown" by George Herbert
8. "The Moose" by Elizabeth Bishop
9. "Sonnet" by Elizabeth Bishop

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Pathos, made acute by its connection to images of childhood, threads together much of the text's content. Alice Methfessel's reading from *Charlotte's Web,* like Giroux's tale of his niece and *La Bohème,* invites a sentimental response; the famous children's novel ends with the pig, Wilbur, remembering Charlotte as he watches her babies sail from her nest. Furthermore, the passage anticipates Vendler's descriptions of Bishop's "kindness to the young" and sets up (serendipitously) Robert Fitzgerald's reading of "Manners (for a Child of 1918)."

Neither Fitzgerald's commentary nor the poem he chooses could be accurately described as sentimental. But Fitzgerald reads "Manners" as if he were telling a children's story: his manner is conversational, and he gives voices to the characters. According to his introductory comments, the poem is meant to demonstrate that Bishop "loved the oddities and the beauties among things seen and heard. And in her poems they were subject to a serene ordering, as in the little poem that I would like to read." Among Bishop's poems, not least those in the memorial text, "Manners" does seem "little"—a simple work, thematically and poetically. However, as we've seen with "North Haven," the ease or serenity of the narrative belies the labor of the ordering. Fitzgerald's "serene ordering" is an incisive description of Bishop's process.

The memorial text goes on to pay tribute to Bishop's influence on postmodern poetry, as Ashbery credits "A Miracle for Breakfast" with inspiring his experiments with sestinas. It also presents her as translator, with Paz offering a tribute to Bishop as "a truly modern artist." But the many ideas of Bishop that circulate in the service—spiritual and musical, empathetic, modernist, and complex—coalesce in Helen Vendler's introduction and reading of "Love Unknown."

Bishop's relationship with Herbert is well known (I use *relationship* to highlight her personal as well as intellectual connection to the poet of Little Gidding). Shortly after the tragic death of her partner, Lota Soares, Bishop received a copy of Herbert's *Selected Poetry* edited by Joseph Summers, a friend and Herbert scholar. In a letter (23 September 1967), Bishop thanks him for his "beautiful little Herbert book," praises his introduction, and writes, "I've been reading some of the poems again, too—some even help a bit, I think" (*One Art* 469). Bishop found Herbert consoling, at least "a bit," and in an essay on the two poets, Joseph Summers draws on unpublished correspondence to demonstrate that Bishop admired Herbert's tormented but steadfast faith in the face of pain and

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loss. The Bishop-Herbert relationship, founded on a shared sense of loss, stands behind Vendler's inclusion of Herbert in the memorial text. But her choice of "Love Unknown" adds another layer of meanings—and text—to the service.

Vendler chooses the poem because Bishop had chosen it. "Love Unknown" was paired with Bishop's "In the Waiting Room" in a curious coffee table book from 1974, *Preferences: 51 American Poets Choose Poems from Their Own Work and from the Past*. According to the editor of the volume, the poet Richard Howard, *Preferences* was the brainchild of the photographer Thomas Victor. Inspired by his collection of photographs of the modern poets, Victor suggested that poets identify

> poems of their own they preferred, and with them poems from the past, poems from before 1900, from the entire range of poetry with which they felt their own poems sustained some interesting relation, even the relation of contradiction or challenge. (Howard x)

Vendler mentions *Preferences* and "In the Waiting Room" before reading "Love Unknown," so that Bishop's preference becomes a context for the reading and "In the Waiting Room" an intertext.

Written in dialogue—arguably the most accessible of literary forms—"Love Unknown" constructs a dense allegory in which the suffering of the good soul is rationalized. The speaker, a renter who tries to improve the lands that he holds, complains to a friend about suffering at the hands of his lord; the friend takes the side of the lord and demonstrates how suffering can be construed as salubrious. "In the Waiting Room" is similarly conversational, in that the reader is the friend to whom the speaker recounts her puzzling experience. Pain is pivotal in Bishop's poem, as it is in Herbert's—especially pain's surprise. In "Love Unknown" the speaker offers a sacrifice to his lord "to warm his love, which I did fear grew cold" (31), but the speaker is shocked when the lord's servant snatches his heart and throws it in the "scalding pan" marked "AFFLICTION." The physical pain is redoubled by its being unexpected and, moreover, emotionally charged. Aunt Consuelo's physical pain in "In the Waiting Room" is redoubled in Elizabeth, who is surprised into traumatic identification with adulthood, womanhood, and humanity, each in its fleshly weakness. "What took me / completely by surprise," she tells us, "was that it was me: / my voice, in my mouth" (160). Like the speaker of "Love Unknown,"

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Elizabeth confronts herself, disoriented and frightened, on the other side of surprising pain.

While these similarities present themselves when "Love Unknown" and "In the Waiting Room" are placed in dialogue—as they are, I'm arguing, not only in *Preferences* but also at the service, by virtue of Vendler's invoking the anthology and reading the Herbert—an important difference between the poems repays close attention. "In the Waiting Room" offers no consolation to the suffering Elizabeth. There is in the end no freedom from her sense of misery (to borrow from Samuel Johnson's definition of "console"). She is "back in it" after her epiphany, back in the waiting room and the troubled world, though compounding her vexations now is the question of who she is. By contrast, Herbert's poem ends in blessed assurance. "Your Master," the friend explains, "strive[s] to mend, what you had marr'd" (67). The point of suffering is to render the sufferer "new, tender, quick" (70). It seems unlikely that Bishop believed this, and yet by pairing "Love Unknown" and "In the Waiting Room," she creates an epistemological tension. If experiences of suffering bind past and present, what Bishop and Herbert make of suffering suggests their historical difference. Bishop was attracted to Herbert precisely because his poetry attests to a faith that, as a modern, she considered inaccessible. "I'd been thinking that it was the hymn-singing Baptist backwards . . . village life," she wrote to Summers, "that made me so susceptible to Herbert in the first place" (qtd. in Summers 48). To claim that suffering has a divine origin and rationale is "backwards," but to come through suffering "new, tender, quick" must have seemed a hopeful prospect to Bishop.

So, returning to the memorial service, we arrive at the question of Vendler's choosing to read only the Herbert. Whatever the intent of her choice, the effect of the Herbert alone is hopefulness, and specifically a hopefulness that follows from the heavy intellectual and emotional work represented in the poem. Elsewhere Vendler has argued that Herbert shares Bishop's complexity and all of Bishop's strengths, adding to them an "ease in convention" (85), by which she seems to mean a facility with conventional forms and tropes that allows him to exploit them fully and happily. In the conventional setting of the memorial service, "Love Unknown" resonates where "In the Waiting Room"—with its resistance to consolation—would seem dissonant.[7]

I have been treating Bishop's memorial service as a text, much as I (naturally) did the drafts of "North Haven" or could have treated Bishop's

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Lowell reading. Doing so, I believe, sheds light on a paradox that Bishop confronted in "North Haven": that the materiality of poet and poem fix them in history, that the immateriality of memory and poetry unfixes poet and poem. Lowell is inscribed on the landscape of North Haven, but "North Haven" is unstable as an inscription of Lowell, just as Bishop's memory of him necessarily was. Likewise, how Bishop is remembered at the memorial service is the result of a confluence of memories, loosely channeled as it were by the order of the service, and now filtered through my own interest in reception history. The recording of the service and the publication of "North Haven" attempt to stabilize memory through an act of textualization. But as Bishop pointed out, while the words remain, the poetry changes when it enters the public sphere. In this respect, the memorial service is no less a literary event now, as it is replayed and rethought, than it was as it actually occurred.[8] For just as at any scene of reading, poet and poem are inevitably revised, at a memorial service poet and poem are rewritten by communities of readers gathered to mourn or celebrate, gathered to remember.

Notes

1. Five of these from a recording in New York, 17 October 1947, are in *The Voice of the Poet:* "Cirque d'Hiver," "The Fish," "Varick Street," "Roosters," and "Sleeping on the Ceiling."

2. See especially her comments on *The Dolphin* in her letter to Lowell 21 March 1972 (*One Art* 561–65).

3. In my analysis of the "North Haven" drafts, I have encountered many of the issues discussed by Millier ("Elusive Mastery") and Harrison in their analyses of the drafts of "One Art."

4. For a detailed look at Bishop's debt to Auden, see Costello's "A Whole Climate of Opinion."

5. Interestingly, this Lutheran hymn was translated by a New Englander and Harvard man, Frederic Henry Hedge (1810–1890), who pastored various churches in the Northeast, taught at Harvard, and edited the *Christian Examiner.*

6. On the topic of Bishop and Protestantism, see Cheryl Walker.

7. In just this way, "Twelfth Morning or What You Will," which Anne Hussey reads after Giroux speaks, falls flat. Following the sentimentality of Giroux's

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story, the poem seems particularly recondite—an effect, I would argue, of context.

8. Hans Jauss, Joseph Grigely, Jerome McGann and other textual theorists refer to the publication or going public of text as a literary event, drawing attention to the temporal and social dimensions of literary texts and their meanings. See also Loizeaux and Fraistat.

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Encomium of Helen:
Derek Walcott's Ethical Twist in *Omeros*

Víctor Figueroa

When the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, one of the founding figures of the negritude movement in Caribbean letters, asked in his now-classic *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal,* "Qui et quel nous sommes? [Who and what are we?] Admirable question!" (12), he helped establish the framework that would dominate the work of many colonial and postcolonial writers to come. That framework is certainly central for Derek Walcott, whose work through his middle period[1] was guided by such questions as: Who and what are we, the peoples of the Caribbean? What have we lost in the experience of colonialism? Is it possible to recuperate our roots? Who will we be(come) after colonialism? Walcott, however, has consistently resisted many of the traditional answers to such questions. He has been particularly opposed to attempts to locate Caribbean identity in exclusively African roots, a position much in vogue during his early career as a poet. Rather than privileging a nostalgia for a lost Africa, or for that matter an unquestioning acceptance of Europe, Walcott has remained in agonistic balance between the diverse elements that inform his Caribbean experience and identity.

In his explorations of identity politics, Walcott has highlighted the tensions that pervade his colonial (and postcolonial) condition as experienced in his native Caribbean and as inherited from his mixed African and European descent. Thus, in what are probably his most often quoted lines, we are reminded:

> I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
> Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?

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> I who have cursed
> The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
> Between this Africa, and the English tongue I love?
> Betray them both, or give back what they give?
> How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
> How can I turn from Africa and live? (*Collected Poems* 18)

Walcott's oeuvre is a sustained attempt to incorporate and come to terms with these tensions. Where Walcott differs from many other postcolonial writers is in his refusal to respond with bitterness to the Caribbean's colonial legacy of dispossession, diaspora, and humiliation, and in declining to make his work a quarrel with history: "We owe the past revenge, or nothing, and revenge is uncreative" ("Caribbean" 57). In "The Muse of History," Walcott addresses colonial tensions with an Adamic vision of the New World, beginning anew not by cutting the ties to a suffocating past but rather by transforming the value of that past from the perspective offered by the potentialities of the present. In the work of "the great poets of the New World, from Whitman to Neruda,"

> history is fiction, subject to a fitful muse, memory. Their philosophy, based on a contempt for historic time, is revolutionary, for what they repeat to the New World is its simultaneity with the Old. [. . .] The tough aesthetic of the New World neither explains nor forgives history. It refuses to recognize it as a creative or culpable force. [. . .] The death of a gaucho does not merely repeat, but is, the death of Caesar. Fact evaporates into myth. This is not the jaded cynicism which sees nothing new under the sun, it is an elation which sees everything as renewed.
> (*What the Twilight Says* 37–38)

Walcott distances himself from writers such as V. S. Naipaul, who attacks the Caribbean's uncreative mimicry of European models, but also from the enthusiastic search for "true" single roots that characterizes movements such as negritude.[2] For Walcott, the New World is original not because it breaks away from the Old but because of its "simultaneity" with it. As a result, the New World is Adamic because in its mimicry we are, in Derrida's terms, "faced then with mimicry imitating nothing; faced, so to speak, with a double that doubles no simple, a double that nothing anticipates, nothing at least that is not itself already double" (206).

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Walcott's Adamic mimicry is ultimately an attempt to defend the integrity and creativity of Caribbean cultures against the dismissive attacks of (neo)colonial judges like Naipaul.[3] However, in his earlier works Walcott's defense remains essentially ontological: it attempts to answer the question "qui et quel nous sommes," to define the reality of the Caribbean by creating it.

By the time Walcott publishes *Omeros* in 1990, there is a fundamental twist in his approach. The ontological question remains important, but the emphasis has shifted toward a different kind of question, one that could be described as ethical.[4] Thus, while some of the characters in the poem are still engaged with questions of identity,[5] Walcott seems more interested in examining the possibility of alliances between different ethnicities and cultures, and in questioning unequal and unjust relations within power structures, than in articulating identity. This is clearly shown by the important roles played by Major Plunkett and *Omeros*'s autobiographical first-person narrator. Plunkett, a retired British army officer living in St. Lucia, must articulate a new sense of his life's meaning in postindependence St. Lucia. The narrator is a writer who divides his time between the island and a teaching position in the US. For both, the main dilemma as the poem progresses is not trying to sort out the diverse aspects of their postcolonial selves but rather honestly determining whether they can relate to other islanders in an equitable manner that relinquishes the privileges of old colonial authority or social advantage. In other words, Walcott shifts the emphasis from Who am I? to How do I relate to my neighbor, to the other facing me?

This shift marks what I call an ethical twist to the traditional politics of identity in (post)colonial struggles for emancipation (of course, I mean a shift in emphasis, not an abandonment of one set of questions for the other). My understanding of ethics here is essentially Levinasian: the primacy of respect for alterity, the acknowledgment of the other's irreducible difference, what Édouard Glissant terms the other's "opacité" (203).[6] While for Levinas the other remains rather abstract, in the Argentinean philosopher Enrique Dussel's work the Levinasian other becomes identified with the concrete subaltern colonized masses that have been the exploited nuts and bolts in the imperial construction of a European modernity that also writes them out of existence.[7] It is those questions regarding the way alterity relates to power, as opposed to questions regarding true identity, that come to fore in *Omeros*.

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Of course, this shift does complicate the poet's understanding of identity. As the poem progresses, the reader begins to realize that, with the questioning of the rhetoric of identity, the poem's narrator may discover himself as having more in common with the oppressors than with the oppressed. His role in the questioning of authoritarianism becomes increasingly unclear, and more often than not he realizes that, in spite of his critique of current power structures, he is securely on the side of authority. The poet finds himself writing lovingly about "his people," yes, but he also understands that he is "loving them from hotels" (228).[8] Caught between worlds, the Caribbean poet is forced to revaluate his alignment with subaltern populations that he often takes for granted. In *Omeros* the pretension that comes most powerfully under scrutiny is the claim that the poet can "speak for the subaltern," to echo Spivak's famous formulation, a claim that we can recognize in such foundational figures of committed poetry as Aimé Césaire and Pablo Neruda, and that often serves as the moral ground and justification for artistic/literary production in (post)colonial societies.

The narrator's dilemma in *Omeros* is that while as a Caribbean poet he does share at least some cultural background with the subaltern (the identity link), he finds himself differently positioned in the spectrum of power. He is both identified with the subaltern and forced to acknowledge the subaltern's alterity.[9] In fact, the poet is caught between the duty to question power and the subaltern's questioning of the poet's power. Before the metropolis, the poet must speak; before the subaltern, he should remain silent and listen, unless he wants to repeat a silencing gesture that is in fact intimately tied to colonial authoritarianism.

Nowhere is the ethical quandary of *Omeros* more clearly seen than in the poem's treatment of Helen, one of its main characters, whom both Plunkett and the narrator transform into an emblem of St. Lucia. Indeed, the reader is informed that because of its beauty and because many empires fought wars over it, historians have referred to St. Lucia as the Helen of the Caribbean. For both Plunkett and the narrator it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish among the ancient Helen of Troy, the island, and the actual St. Lucian woman who is Achille's lover and Plunkett's maid. Both of them decide to honor her: Plunkett by writing the history of the island and the narrator by writing the poem that we hold in our hands. But Helen remains too distant and proud throughout the whole poem for Plunkett ever to feel entirely comfortable with his own version

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of her. The major perpetually lusts after her, and his history buries Helen beneath layers of mythical parallels that allow for her vicarious possession. Like Plunkett, the narrator is endlessly fascinated by Helen's beauty and repeatedly paralyzed by her disdainful attitude. Both characters consistently try to counteract her alterity by clothing it with poetic imagery.

Writing his history of St. Lucia/Helen, Plunkett comes to realize that "the harder he worked, the more he betrayed his wife" (103). The reason comes as no surprise: as he examines his books through his "Cyclops eye" (his magnifying glass) he sees "over wooden waves of a naval aquatint, / a penile cannon emerge from its embrochure. / Able semen, he smiled" (102). Later still, his magnifying glass

> magnified the peaks of the island's breasts
> and it buried stiff factions. He had come that far
> to learn that History earns its own tenderness
> in time; not for a navel victory, but for
> the V of a velvet back in a yellow dress.
> . . . the island was Helen. (103)

Plunkett's project inevitably involves both reifying Helen and sexualizing the island. Even if it represents an attempt at historical vindication of the colonized, Plunkett's history constitutes an act of epistemic violence that inserts Helen within a narrative that ultimately justifies her status as political or sexual possession. It remains within the rhetoric of colonialism because its aspirations are no different from those of the colonial enterprise. The island is a beautiful woman to be possessed, and the woman is a beautiful island to be inhabited.

While the conflation of the discourses of sexual and political possession is not uncommon in the language of colonialism, Plunkett at least claims to write out of regret about his privileged position and out of a desire to contribute to Helen's well-being.[10] If we accept his sincerity, his slippage into the tropes and attitudes of colonial discourse is even more significant, revealing colonialism as an all-pervasive structuring system. The individual (including the colonizer trying to abandon his role) cannot escape a semiotic system grounded on the colonial difference (the ostensibly inherent inferiority or reification of the subaltern).[11]

If the rhetoric of colonialism depends on such a semiotic system, then any anticolonial stand must acknowledge of what Glissant calls the colonized's "droit à l'opacité" (203), the subaltern's right not to be re-

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duced to the colonizer's view of him or her: the colonial subject is always more and other than the imperial version of him or her. Although this acknowledgment is not sufficient for an emancipating project, it remains a necessary step. And *Omeros* seems to suggest that because the erasure of the subaltern's agency is so deeply ingrained in the colonial system, this necessary step becomes particularly important in the case of groups or individuals from the metropolitan centers (such as Plunkett) attempting to establish alliances with subaltern groups. Any such decolonizing gesture in fact paves the way to neocolonial authoritarianism unless the metropolitan, in Doris Sommer's phrase, proceeds with caution.

Like Plunkett's, the poem's narrator's attempts to portray Helen illustrate the difficulty of proceeding with sufficient caution. He attempts like Plunkett to celebrate Helen, a celebration that is part of his defense/vindication of her, and as a West Indian poet, he might seem even more justified than Plunkett in his commitment to Helen/St. Lucia: it seems to be his duty as a Caribbean intellectual. However, as we can see in the following description of their encounter, in his very celebration of Helen he finds it hard to stop himself from taking control of her:

> I stopped, but it took me all the strength in the world
> to approach her stall, as it takes for a hunter
> to approach a branch where a pantheress lies curled
> with leaf-light on its black silk. (36–37)

Helen is animalized, and the poetic act of representing her is figured as an attempt to take her life.

The consistent attempt to erase otherness is registered in Helen's resistance to these attacks. Just before figuring her as a pantheress, the poet-narrator writes:

> I saw her once after that moment on the beach
> when her face shook my heart, and that incredible
> stare paralyzed me past any figure of speech. (36)

That this passage just precedes the poet's rendering Helen as a pantheress suggests the difficulty of dispensing with his entrapping simile. Since in the poem figures of speech operate as means of subsuming otherness, to be "paralyzed . . . past any figure of speech" might constitute an ethical position. But this paralysis is not self-generated. It is produced by Helen's resistant "stare."

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By examining how certain figures of speech enact an imperial gaze, I do not mean to imply the possibility of a representation that would somehow present Helen "as she really is," beyond figuration. All representation is figuration, and thus there is no space "past any figure of speech." But if there is no alternative to representation itself, there are alternatives to any specific form of representation. And the specific tropes with which both the narrator and Plunkett represent Helen function as attempts to dominate her. Plunkett and the narrator themselves understand this, themselves pass judgment on their own rhetorical performances, and both acknowledge Helen's resistance to their representations of her. Whether, having problematized its own modes of figuration, the poem has Plunkett and the narrator succeed at finding alternative modes is a question I will turn to in the last pages of this essay.

In a fundamental moment of *Omeros,* the narrator acknowledges his and Plunkett's appropriation of Helen:

> There, in her head of ebony,
> there was no real need for the historian's
> remorse, nor for literature's. Why not see Helen
> as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow,
> swinging her plastic sandals on that beach alone
> as fresh as the sea-wind? Why make the smoke a door? (271)

The "smoke" that both Plunkett and the narrator attempt to "make . . . a door" evokes Glissant's concept of opacity. Making the smoke a door thus repeats the epistemic violence of colonialism. The next section of the poem makes this aggression explicit:

> All that Greek manure under the green bananas,
> under the indigo hills, the rain-rutted road,
> the galvanized village, the myth of rustic manners,
> glazed by the transparent page of what I had read.
> What I had read and rewritten till literature
> was guilty as History. When would the sails drop
> from my eyes, when would I not hear the Trojan War
> in two fishermen in Ma Kilman's shop?
> When would my head shake off its echoes like a horse
> shaking off a wreath of flies? When would it stop,
> the echo in the throat, insisting, "Omeros":
> when would I enter that light beyond metaphor? (271)

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If "literature / was guilty as History," the poem's approach to Helen as an embodiment of St. Lucia is complicit in the violence of colonial discourse. Precisely for this reason, the poet's question, "when would I enter that light beyond metaphor?" is an ethical one. In the "light beyond metaphor" the smoke would appear as smoke, and one would "proceed with caution" when engaged by alterity, lest one repeat, even with the best intentions, the epistemic violence that characterizes the colonial enterprise.

To really acknowledge alterity, however, exposes the extent to which the (imperial) self's presumed self-contained unity was always illusory. It is not surprising that both Plunkett and the narrator, like other characters in the poem, end up wounded, limping, or fractured.[12] But it is from the precariousness of those broken selves that a real acknowledgment of the other might emerge, once the obsession with filiation (the primacy of ancestral roots as a source of stable identity) and master narratives is subordinated to the uncertainties of mutuality (the ethical twist).[13]

A similar point could be made about the poem itself. Although it is in one sense an epic about the Caribbean, one whole book (book 4) focuses on Native North Americans, and another (book 5) on important historical centers of European colonialism, including ancient Greece. While these books interrupt the flow of the action, they play an important role when one considers that *Omeros* is not exclusively about the Caribbean in the conventional sense of trying to articulate a Caribbean identity. The poem can be read also as an inquiry into a series of ethical questions: Can metropolitan centers and subaltern groups move past the epistemic violence that has governed their relations? Is it possible to find grounds for emancipation and solidarity beyond the enclosing models of pure identity, national or otherwise, that have traditionally governed such efforts? Can the privileged speak in favor of the subaltern without subsuming the subaltern's agency? Such questions shift attention from the rhetoric of identity to issues of relation and power, and the interruption of the book's narrative unity makes perfect sense in this context, since, as I have argued, the epistemic violence par excellence is to imagine the other as adequately defined by a closed, faultless narrative or the perfect metaphor. The opacity of the other—interrupting coherent narration, ancestral filiation, and self-enclosed selfhood—may need to be asserted aggressively, as in the case of Helen, the character about whom, tellingly, we end up knowing the least. But out of this resistance, and out of a fragmented self open (and vulnerable) to the voice of the other, the possibility of an ethical relation may arise.

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After the death of his wife, whom he has "betrayed" through his vicarious possession of Helen, Major Plunkett has an ethical awakening of sorts and decides to abandon his history of St. Lucia. From then on, he sees in Helen "not a cause or a cloud, only a name for a local wonder" (309). The result is literary silence: he permanently interrupts his historical project. For Plunkett, such silence does not really constitute a great dilemma, inasmuch as he is, after all, only an amateur historian. His main field of action is his business, and it is there that his ethical awakening may assert itself (though every sphere of action has its particular difficulties, and it would be interesting to know how the privileged, white Plunkett finally does apply his ethical insights in his impoverished, black context).

The poet-narrator, however, is faced with a more serious quandary. If he were to take his ethical insights seriously, we might not have the poem we are reading in our hands. Perhaps we would have a different poem, one that would deal exclusively with Helen, "a local wonder," and with the other characters, but would not attempt to impose on them the web of metaphors and Homeric parallels that pin them like exotic butterflies on the master frame of European history. It is difficult, of course, for literature to avoid the betrayal of reductionism, and the semantic disseminations of language itself can subvert the best of intentions—as Walcott is keenly aware. As a response, silence is not as far-fetched as it may at first appear, and indeed some writers have opted for it. *Omeros,* however, is already written, and one must consider to what degree the poem is able to overcome the specific figures and narrative that the characters themselves reveal as problematic.

As a St. Lucian, one of "them," the narrator's position with regard to characters like Helen and Achille is very different from that of Plunkett. Presumably his vocation as a poet and intellectual carries a responsibility with it, especially considering that the intellectual has a responsibility to his or her people—a pervasive notion in (post)colonial literatures, including Caribbean writing. In a recent work, for example, the Dominican critic Silvio Torres-Saillant critiques those Caribbean writers who

> pay little heed to the principle articulated by their fellow emigrant, Trinidadian novelist Samuel Selvon, who posited that the West Indian writer had no greater responsibility than "that of making his country and his people known accurately to the rest of the world." (42)

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First among those chastised by Torres-Saillant for "paying little heed" (41) to that responsibility is Walcott himself, who in the past has often had to face the accusation of not being committed enough, of being too "difficult" or "literary."

It is certainly true that Walcott's works have often posed the problem of how, for the Caribbean intellectual, commitment serves both as a justification of his vocation and as a threat to it. He does not deny the writer's responsibility to his or her people, but his works do question any simple identity between the intellectual and the subaltern masses. For Walcott, the Caribbean writer is inevitably suspended, as he puts it in *The Arkansas Testament,* between "Here" (1) and "Elsewhere" (59), always in a position of relative privilege in societies that have endured, and continue to struggle with, the imperial designs of metropolitan interests.

But it is one thing for a postcolonial writer to accept the burden of responsibility, another to understand exactly what that responsibility is. To explicitly denounce oppression? Indeed, but then what is the right balance between aesthetics and politics? That some works succeed splendidly in achieving this balance, such as Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal,* confirms rather than denies the writer's dilemma, and it is not surprising that while Walcott has always remained a loyal admirer of Césaire, some of his literary and critical assaults have been against less accomplished propagators of negritude.[14] In a key passage from *Omeros,* the tension between commitment and aesthetics becomes the poem's explicit subject:

> Didn't I want the poor
> to stay in the same light so that I could transfix
> them in amber, the afterglow of an empire,
> preferring a shed of palm-thatch with tilted sticks
> to that blue bus-stop? Didn't I prefer a road
> from which tracks climbed into the thickening syntax
> of colonial travelers, the measured prose I read
> as a schoolboy? . . .
>
> Had they waited for me
> to develop my craft? Why hallow that pretense
> of preserving what they left, the hypocrisy
> of loving them from hotels, a biscuit-tin fence
> smothered in love-vines, scenes to which I was attached
> as blindly as Plunkett with his remorseful research?

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> Art is history's nostalgia, it prefers a thatched
> roof to a concrete factory . . .
> Hadn't I made their poverty my paradise? (227–28)

Playing on the problematic logic of the ideal of *littérature engagé,* the poem knows that it feeds on the reality it is presumably trying to transform. The poem may not turn its back on the wretched of the earth, nor truly wish their deliverance.

What *Omeros* seems to suggest is that while this dilemma may not be fully resolvable, the poet is nevertheless bound to the dispossessed by his or her very position of privilege. If aesthetic disengagement is not an option, neither should fear of trespassing ethical boundaries lead to silence. If the poem demonstrates anything, it is precisely that in its attempt to engage an unjust social or political order, committed poetry may always betray its own ethical imperative—above all, respect of the other's opacity—but it must engage that injustice nonetheless. Our response to the other, to the ethical claim he or she makes on us, may never be entirely satisfactory. Yet respond we must.

While confronting the impossibility of doing full justice to the other carries the risk of passivity or cynicism, it can also function as a spur to strive even harder, like an ethical Sisyphus. It is the distinction between those two responses that the poetic performance of *Omeros* addresses. While the book never fully abandons the concern with vertical filiation (identity) for the sake of horizontal relation (ethics), and although it never quite abandons metaphorical appropriation for the sake of respect for opacity, it certainly thematizes these issues explicitly. By doing this, *Omeros* points to an ethical imperative and self-restriction that it does not completely fulfill, but whose necessity it powerfully makes clear. In this sense, Walcott's approach in this poem is very different from that of poets such as Neruda or Césaire, always willing to lend their voice to those who have no voice. By explicitly exploring the dangers of that approach, Walcott obliquely subverts its authoritarianism, even though he cannot fully escape it.

Perhaps one could argue that this position, while commendable in its honesty, is too weak to address the problem of injustice, that—excused by the impossibility of doing full justice to the ethical imperative and by the poet's publicly expressed regret—it enables further epistemic violence. Indeed, this problem emerges at the end of *Omeros.* With very few pages

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left, the poem's voyage from ontology to ethics has been completed, and both Plunkett and the narrator have acknowledged the danger in how they have approached Helen. However, in a final comment on the fact that both the St. Lucian Helen and the Homeric Helen share the same name, the poem muses:

> Names are not oars
> that have to be laid side by side, nor are legends;
> slowly the foaming clouds have forgotten ours.
> You were never in Troy, and, between two Helens,
> yours is here and alive; their classic features
> were turned into silhouettes from the lighting bolt
> of a glance. These Helens are different creatures,
> one marble, one ebony. One unknots a belt
> of yellow cotton slowly from her shelving waist,
> one a cord of purple wool, the other one takes
> a bracelet of white cowries from a narrow wrist;
> one lies in a room with olive-eyed mosaics,
> another in a beach shack with its straw mattress,
> but each draws an elbow slowly over her face
> and offers the gift of her sculptured nakedness,
> parting her mouth. (312–13)

I can hardly read this passage as anything other than a slip back into the very rhetoric that the poem has arduously tried to leave behind. Although he begins by emphasizing once again that the two Helens cannot and should not be conflated, the poet seems unable to resist the temptation of elaborating once again on the attractions of each woman, until finally they are fused again into a single object of desire—an object, for that matter, that offers itself as a "gift" to the poet. Again, the poet's desire transforms Helen into a metaphor that defines her, not us, as responsible for her own objectification. It appears that at the very end, the aesthetic and erotic pleasures of his craft, in spite of the epistemic violence they exert on Helen (as revealed by the narrator himself), overcome the scruples of respect for opacity, and the poet does not pass by the opportunity to submit the other to his desire. This failure is especially revealing in light of the fact that it is the poem itself that has questioned the legitimacy of that erotic/aesthetic subjugation of Helen in particular and otherness in general.

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The sophist philosopher Gorgias, best known from Plato's homonymous dialogue, left for posterity a fascinating text that remains one of the few extant examples of ancient Greek rhetoric: the *Encomium of Helen*. Gorgias's argument is that Helen could only have gone to Troy under the influence of one of four causes: the will of the gods, the power of Paris's speech, love, or force. In any of those cases, Gorgias argues, Helen should be exonerated from guilt, for she was under the influence of powers too mighty for any human will to resist.

Gorgias ends the *Encomium* by declaring that the text is a game composed for his own amusement. Some scholars have taken this statement literally, arguing that praise for someone as obviously immoral as Helen cannot be taken seriously. In this view, the text is an exercise designed to show the persuasive power of speech regardless of its veracity (a performance of what today we have come to associate with the term *sophist*). Other scholars see the *Encomium* as making a serious argument.[15] Regardless of which side one takes, however, Helen's position remains quite precarious. Either she is guilty from the start, in which case any defense could only be a joke, or the defense is serious and she acted under the compulsion of external forces, in which case she lacks agency—she is not really acting but is acted upon. In fact, the possibility that Helen acted by her own will is equated with a moral lack, so she can only be innocent but powerless or willful but evil. In the tight logic of this narrative, Helen is a silenced subaltern. She is silenced both by her accusers and her defenders.

The silencing logic of Gorgias's *Encomium* is pertinent to Walcott's *Omeros*, itself a kind of encomium of Helen. The poem's repetition of the colonial gesture in its choice of feminine metaphors betrays the fact that both "accusers" (the colonial metropolis) and "defenders" (the poet-narrator and Plunkett) share a fundamental set of presuppositions. This is not to deny that Walcott, as a poet and intellectual, takes his commitment to St. Lucia seriously. But, to evoke an allegory dear to Caribbean and postcolonial studies, it seems that while Prospero can easily be accused of colonizing both Caliban and Miranda, Caliban's response is all too often assumed to be limited to seizing Miranda so he can "people this isle with Calibans" (Shakespeare 120). The imagined alternatives to Prospero's authoritarian control of Miranda, that is, also objectify her. While the poet and the colonial metropolis remain firmly in tension, the feminized

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Caribbean and the Caribbean woman remain mostly mute objects of their discourses and possession.

My observations may appear unfair to a reader less interested in how epistemic violence can be implicated in the rhetorical dimension of language than in any discourse's explicitly thematized contents. Images such as the feminization of the land, that reader might suggest, may be unfortunate, but do not necessarily detract from the poem's genuinely emancipating thrust, and they reveal as much as they conceal. At the least, however, this is not a position that the poem itself supports. It deals precisely with resistance to the epistemic violence of a metropolitan gaze and discourse. And the narrator quite explicitly critiques his own chosen set of images and tropes. He makes clear how the figure of this "metaphorical woman," the mythical Helen, becomes the St. Lucian woman, who then remains trapped in this suspect image superimposed on her. In the poem, Helen has to struggle not only against an oppressive social order but also against an oppressive emancipating rhetoric. While it is true that rhetoric itself cannot be avoided, and while the Homeric parallels might be said to illuminate at least as much as they obscure the lives of the islanders, it is the strength of the poem that it follows the less-taken road of questioning its own rhetorical strategies. In this, it illuminates an aspect of emancipatory discourse that is often obscured.

As I have suggested, such illumination makes the final slip into objectifying traditional rhetoric all the more problematic. Indeed, *Omeros* could be regarded in the end as the chronicle of a failure, at least with regard to the problem that it most urgently poses. Either the narrator remains unwilling to yield before the opacity of otherness—to stop before capturing and exhibiting the other in the confines of his rhetorical figures—or he is simply unable to stop, much though he tries. In either case, however, we are able to recognize this failure because the poem itself has made it discernible, largely by alerting us to another possibility: the possibility of liberating the other from our story line, of remaining in the darkness that all alterity exudes. Again, articulating this challenge may not be a sufficient step, but it remains a necessary one for the overcoming of the epistemic violence on which colonialism itself is predicated. *Omeros*'s success, then, is to clarify the terms of its failure.

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Notes

1. Patricia Ismond has called this the "Caribbean phase" of Walcott's poetry. In my own view, the publication of Walcott's *Collected Poems* in 1984 is a more appropriate dividing moment, with 1987's *The Arkansas Testament* already moving toward the ethical twist that I argue becomes central in *Omeros* (1990).

2. Not surprisingly, he has been accused by some critics of not being "black enough." They persistently oppose Walcott's "humanist" poetry to Kamau Brathwaite's "folk" poetry. See Ismond's "Walcott Versus Brathwaite," Charles W. Pollard (28–29), and Bruce King.

3. Walcott's observations on Caribbean mimicry are to a large extent a response to books such as Naipaul's *The Middle Passage* and *The Mimic Men*.

4. The shift of emphasis is gradual. For example, Walcott points to "The Light of the World," a poem in *The Arkansas Testament,* as a direct precursor of some of the preoccupations of *Omeros* (*Conversations* 174).

5. Achille, one of *Omeros*'s protagonists, is a St. Lucian fisherman who travels back to Africa in a dream and on waking up comes to terms not only with his African ancestry but, equally important, with the fact that he cannot predicate his identity on that African past. For Achille and for some other characters in the poem it becomes necessary to acknowledge their ambiguous position in geography and history: while their selves certainly emerged from the experience of colonialism and the middle passage, their bodies and identities are now part of, and should come to fully inhabit, the Caribbean.

6. For Levinas on ethics and alterity, see *Totality and Infinity,* particularly section 1.

7. Dussel writes:

> Levinas habla siempre del otro como lo "absolutamente otro." Tiende entonces hacia la equivocidad. Por otra parte, nunca ha pensado que el otro pudiera ser un indio, un africano, un asiático. El otro, para nosotros, es América Latina con respecto a la totalidad europea; es el pueblo pobre y oprimido latinoamericano con respecto a las oligarquías dominadoras y sin embargo dependientes. (*Método* 181–82)

My translation:

> Levinas always refers to the other as that which is "absolutely other." Then he tends to become ambiguous. On the other hand, he has never thought that the other could be an Indian, an African, an Asian. The other, for us, is Latin America with regards to the totality of Europe; it

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is the poor and oppressed Latin American people with regards to the oligarchies that dominate them, but that also remain dependent.

A systematic exposition of Dussel's thought can be found in his *Philosophy of Liberation*.

8. I often refer to the narrator as the poet because the narrative takes the form of a poem and the story presents the narrator character as a writer.

9. The narrator's ambiguous and at times tense relation to the surrounding St. Lucian characters reflects some elements from Walcott's biography, particularly his growing up in a Methodist, mulatto, middle-class family in a primarily Catholic, black, impoverished milieu. For more information on Walcott's childhood and youth in St. Lucia, see King.

10. June Scott offers valuable insights into the rhetorical use of gender categories in the articulation of historical discourse.

11. For the concept of colonial difference, see Mignolo.

12. Plunkett has the scar of a war wound; Philoctete has an open (but eventually healed) wound that represents the painful legacy of the Middle Passage; the narrator is fractured between the "here" of the island and the "elsewhere" of his overseas job.

13. For a thorough analysis of the significance of the trope of the wound in *Omeros* and Walcott's other works, see Ramazani.

14. See for example "The Muse of History," *What the Twilight Says* 36–64.

15. For divergent views on the seriousness of Gorgias's arguments, see Robert Wardy and the preface and notes to the *Encomium* by D. M. MacDowell.

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Novel Ethics: Alterity and Form in *Jacob's Room*

Rachel Hollander

Though few critics would still claim that the modernist novel privileges experimental form over engagement with social and political concerns, most literary histories have not succeeded in articulating how modernist developments in the style and content of the English novel reflect a transformation of the relationship between literature and politics. If the Victorian realist novel seems to rely on an understanding of morality that values sympathetic identification and the possibility of common interests, what forms the basis of the ethical and political significance of the novel when fragmentation and extreme skepticism have replaced faith in progress and comprehension? The poststructuralist rethinking of ethics in terms of responsibility for the absolutely other, associated most closely with Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, enables a more complex understanding of how modernism's formal conventions reflect and extend a new conception of literary representation and its relationship to the real. Focusing on its status as both structurally experimental and deeply engaged with questions of war, urbanism, and gender, I will suggest that Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* illustrates how the modernist English novel interweaves ethical, political, and epistemological concerns. In doing so I hope to clarify a contemporary understanding of the ethics of fiction.

Modernist fiction is often defined as deeply opposed to the didactic, moralistic Victorian novel. I would like to propose, however, a more complicated story about the relationship between realism, modernism, and ethics. George Eliot rejects the idea, held by many of her contemporaries, of the novel as a means of teaching by example; she resists the belief that literature engenders moral behavior simply by portraying the rewards

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of good behavior and the consequences of bad in an idealized fictional world of ethically unambiguous characters. Instead, she is committed to the realist representation of a wide range of classes and characters that can spark the reader's own potential for sympathetic identification and morally responsible behavior. For Eliot, to know and understand the plight of the other is difficult but not impossible, and the author has a responsibility to represent the world—especially the human actors within that world—as truthfully as possible, since only art that strives for truth can contribute to the moral development of its audience. The novel does not transmit morality in any straightforward sense for Eliot, but it does awaken the reader's capacity for the sympathy with others that engenders a sense of ethical responsibility.[1]

In *Jacob's Room,* often considered her first modernist novel, Woolf similarly concerns herself with the question of how another person can be known and understood. And I will argue that she is also, like Eliot, committed to a theory of literature that recognizes the capacity of the novel to engender an ethical response in its readers. Crucially, however, while Eliot values the novel's capacity to teach sympathy, Woolf's novel in effect teaches the dangers of sympathy.[2] Emerging from the postwar crisis of faith in the possibility of complete knowledge and truthful understanding, a pervasive sense of unknowability saturates and shapes Woolf's experimental fiction. While such failures of communication are a familiar feature of modernist literature, I argue that Woolf's novel highlights the necessity of reading such gaps as the very encounter with otherness that defines the ethics of modernism.

As analysis of the historical and cultural embeddedness of modernist literature continues to flourish, Woolf has become an especially important figure, partly since she and her Bloomsbury contemporaries took such an active and well-documented interest in the political, artistic, and social events of their time. One reason for the recent surge of critical interest in Woolf and ethics may be that her novels stage such a wide range of approaches to questions of self and other, communication and alienation, intimacy and distance.[3] While much of this work has explored important connections between Woolf's political and ethical concerns, it too often fails to reckon with the most radical aspects of Levinas's conception of the ethical encounter with the other.[4]

Woolf's project of remaking the form of the novel anticipates Levinas's rejection of a moral philosophy that assumes a unified subject

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in favor of an ethics in which the other precedes the existence of the self. Evoking the genre of the bildungsroman only to expose its inadequacy, *Jacob's Room* represents Woolf's first attempt to break fully from the traditions of Victorian and Edwardian realism.[5] In her rejection of familiar forms of character, plot, and narrative convention, she implicitly acknowledges the profound changes in individuals and their relations in the wake of World War I. Only relatively recently have readers and critics been able to appreciate the aesthetic and philosophical significance of this novel, and I would argue that this appreciation has been enabled, at least in part, by poststructuralist rethinkings of the categories of subjectivity, language, and ethics. In particular, an understanding of ethics as responsibility for the other—a responsibility that calls the self into being—allows us to recognize in new ways how *Jacob's Room* represents a self-conscious intervention in the history of the English novel.

In this essay I will attempt to explore Woolf's engagement with absolute otherness—with the limits of knowledge and the failures of connection—in order to suggest an alternative reading of the negotiation between political commitment and modernist form.[6] Reading the novel in dialogue with Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* enables a reassessment of the importance of *Jacob's Room* in Woolf's oeuvre by revealing the complexity of the relationship between modernist aesthetics, ethics, and politics. As Woolf works to transform the conventions of literary representation to reflect more faithfully the disorientations of post–World War I England, she addresses head-on the problems of individual connection and of the novel's relationship to its readers. In *Jacob's Room* she both portrays and enacts the crises of knowledge and ethics that followed the Great War. Turning nineteenth-century realism's faith in progress and the ultimate knowability of others on its head, the novel suggests instead that the attempt to understand the other in terms of the self only produces more ignorance and confusion. To the extent that connection and intimacy are possible, such encounters can only occur within a context of unpredictability and interruption, as these moments challenge our claims to comprehension or self-mastery.

By calling into question the opposition between otherness and intimacy, Woolf also gestures toward a radical feminist politics that anticipates Luce Irigaray's writings on the relationship between ethics and eros. My analysis complicates and extends previous feminist readings of the novel, as I argue that Woolf's representation of Jacob's education is more ambivalent

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than these readings have acknowledged. Rethinking the various modes of pedagogy imagined in *Jacob's Room* through Irigaray's critique of Levinas's ethics, I conclude that a radical vision of feminist exchange is privileged both within the plot of the novel and in its experimental formal strategies. Woolf's interweaving of skepticism and commitment, her simultaneous engagement with and undermining of assumptions about gender, war, and intimacy, suggest a nuanced understanding of the relationship between ethics and politics, realist representation and modernist form.

Killing the other: Levinas, war, and ethics

Before turning to *Jacob's Room,* composed in the years just after World War I and published in 1922, I want to examine Woolf's writing in her diary during the war in order to consider her immediate response to this transformative event. Although these entries are less concerned with politics than one might expect, they are occasionally punctuated by striking reflections on the material and emotional effects of the war. Such comments help us understand the connections between epistemology, representation, and intersubjectivity that are further explored in both the novels and the essays, and they demonstrate that for Woolf, the war raises crucial questions of ethics and human relations that anticipate Levinas's writings on responsibility and otherness. In a telling passage from August 1918 she comments on an episode in which her brother speaks to a German prisoner of war:

> the existence of life in another human being is as difficult to realise as a play of Shakespeare when the book is shut. This occurred to me when I saw Adrian talking to the tall German prisoner. By rights they should have been killing each other. The reason why it is easy to kill another person must be that one's imagination is too sluggish to conceive what his life means to him—the infinite possibilities of a succession of days which are furled in him, & have already been spent.[7] (1: 186)

At first glance, this might appear to be a plea for sympathy with others that is quite similar to George Eliot's claim about realist fiction; for both Woolf and Eliot, imagination is central to the attempt to know another person. Especially when read alongside the novels, however, it is clear that for Woolf the other can be known only in a limited and incomplete way.

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She begins by comparing the "realisation" of another's life with the difficulty of retaining a Shakespeare play after one has read it. The analogy between text and identity will reappear in *Jacob's Room,* and in each instance it implies that both books and people are impossible to "realise" completely. In contrast to Eliot, who argues that the novel is able to represent character accurately enough to stimulate our sympathy (and thereby our moral behavior), Woolf emphasizes the inaccessibility of a deep understanding of another's consciousness. If it is difficult to realize even the mere existence of the life within the other person, a complete knowledge of the content or meaning of that life lies beyond our grasp.

Woolf goes on to associate the failure to grasp the conscious life of the other with the ability to kill. Even here, however, she does not contrast the lack of imagination with a full understanding of the other person; rather, she suggests that at best we might be able to conjure up an image of "the infinite possibilities of a succession of days" and to comprehend the importance of those "possibilities" to that person. To fail to try to imagine the life of the other is an ethical failure—it makes it "easy" to kill and, by extension, allows nations to wage war on each other. At the same time, however, the ethical recognition of the other person does not imply full comprehension or interpretation of his or her consciousness. We are limited to imagining an idea of the other's life that is infinite, just as we imagine our own to be.

In this recognition of the "infinite possibilities" that characterize the other, Woolf's understanding of ethics and identity clearly anticipates that of Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, the question of the self's ability to kill the other raises a complex dilemma. To kill as Woolf describes, without recognizing or acknowledging my responsibility for the other, is not to kill the *other* at all, but merely to fail to distinguish between same and other. Such an action therefore lies completely outside the realm of ethics. The idea of murder, for Levinas, implies the recognition of the infinite, absolute otherness of the other, and thus the other (acknowledged as such) is the only being I can possibly wish to kill. At the same time, however, to recognize my responsibility for the other is also to experience the ethical restriction against murder. As Levinas puts it, the other

> thus opposes to me not a greater force [. . .] not some superlative of power, but precisely the infinity of his transcendence. This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his

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> face, is the primordial *expression,* is the first word: "you shall not commit murder." (199)

Levinas and Woolf seem to share the view that the imaginative recognition of the infinite possibility represented by another person is incompatible with the ability to kill that person easily. In her first major literary work following the war, then, Woolf struggles to portray both the necessity and the difficulty of recognizing and representing the "infinite possibilities" of the other.

"I can't say what 'it' is": London and the limits of knowledge

The diary entries that Woolf wrote while working on *Jacob's Room* shed additional light on questions of knowledge, ethics, and war. In these passages she stresses the inscrutability of the city in the aftermath of the Great War. She suggests not only that it is impossible to know others completely but also that the very attempt to understand may lead to further confusion rather than greater comprehension. In June 1920 she writes of seeing a blind beggar woman singing in London. A similar image appears in chapter 5 of the novel. The description in the diary is especially significant, for it suggests important connections between an inability to know the other and the more generally alienating atmosphere of postwar London. If the earlier diary passage highlights an imaginative failure as a precondition of war, this one suggests that a lingering effect of this recent national trauma is a deep consciousness of the difficulty of understanding another's—or even one's own—experience. Woolf writes of the woman:

> There was a recklessness about her; much in the spirit of London. Defiant—almost gay, clasping her dog as if for warmth. How many Junes has she sat there, in the heart of London? How she came to be there, what scenes she can go through, I can't imagine. O damn it all, I say, why can't I know all that too? (2: 47)

Woolf's initial impulse on seeing the woman is to create for her a narrative, a specific history capable of explaining her presence, background, and motives. Closely associating her with the life of the city, Woolf attempts to read the superficial details (of how she holds the dog, for example)

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in order to flesh out her identity, to bestow depth and a past on the woman's identity. Just as Woolf's own diary documents a succession of "Junes," allowing her to transform everyday experience into story, so she yearns to have access to a comparable accounting of the beggar woman's development.

Rather than inventing a story for the beggar woman, however (as she does for Mrs. Brown in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown"), Woolf instead laments her inability to know the truth of the woman's life, to penetrate successfully beyond her external appearance. The intensity of her frustration suggests that the opacity of the beggar woman's existence serves as a reminder of the many things one "can't" imagine or know. In lieu of pursuing knowledge, Woolf goes on in the diary to try to account for her own motives, to identify why she finds the spectacle so fascinating and provocative:

> Perhaps it was the song at night that seemed strange; she was singing shrilly, but for her own amusement, not begging. Then the fire engines came by—shrill too. [. . .] Sometimes everything gets into the same mood; how to define this one I don't know—it was gay & yet terrible & fearfully vivid. Nowadays I'm often overcome by London; even think of the dead who have walked in the city. [. . .] The view of the grey white spires from Hungerford Bridge brings it to me: & yet I can't say what "it" is.
>
> (2: 47–48)

Having conceded that she is unable to know much about the woman's life, Woolf here persists in trying to rule out some possible motives, stating with assurance that she sings "for her own amusement, not begging." Rather than solving the mystery of the blind woman's existence, however, this observation only seems to reinforce it; if it is not meant to solicit passersby, the "strange" song can mean almost anything. The attempt to understand only exposes the impossibility of doing so. As if in acknowledgment of this conundrum, Woolf returns to her initial perception that the incomprehensible woman represents just one manifestation of a widespread and pervasive urban inscrutability. And as with the song, attempts to define or characterize the overall "mood" of the city only seem to render it more contradictory and elusive, as it is both "gay" and "terrible," "vivid" and yet essentially indefinable. Indeed, each of the elements of this passage—the old woman, the "mood," London itself—evokes para-

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dox, mystery, and the limits of definition or description. The simultaneity and chaos of urban life, in which the beggar's song is echoed in the fire engines' sirens and ghosts of the war dead walk among the living, make it impossible for even as keen an observer of modern life as Woolf's persona in her diary to say what "it" is. And if the attempt to know only results in further mystery, then in some sense all imaginative and inquisitive ventures, novels included, must contain the seeds of their own failure.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the beggar woman appears abruptly in *Jacob's Room* and disappears again after one paragraph consisting only of a single sentence. Though Woolf is in some sense free to invent within the fictional pages of the novel (and she does, in fact, give the woman an illegitimate daughter in the novel who is not mentioned in the diary), she does not explain away the mystery that surrounds the woman's presence in both diary and fiction. Even the addition of the child serves once again to render the woman less transparent, not more: she is "singing out loud, not for coppers, no, from the depths of her gay wild heart—her sinful, tanned heart—for the child who fetches her is the fruit of sin [. . .]" (89). Though the narrator opens the possibility of harsh judgment of the woman's "sin," she seems to refrain from full condemnation, leaving it to the reader to try to reconcile the "gay wild heart" with the evidence of sinful behavior. Like her forebear in the diary, this blind woman too contains contradictory elements that seem to confound easy characterization or conclusion. Refusing to define the beggar woman's existence, to try to make her mean or symbolize some specific feeling or concept, allows her to embody the problem of meaning and knowledge itself. The presence of the beggar woman in both texts thus helps to refine a sense of Woolf's understanding of ethics and otherness. Our desire to imagine the fullness and depth of another's interior life only brings us face to face with our inability to know, and thus to an ethical restraint through which we encounter our responsibility for the other *as* absolutely other.

If the beggar woman becomes a figure for absolute inscrutability or difference, however, this raises the question of her status in more material terms. In both diary and novel, the focus on the inability to know or understand the woman's story seems to supersede the issue of whether or not one is able—even obligated—to help her, to take some concrete action even if it appears that she is not explicitly requesting money. And one possible reading of both scenes is that Woolf, unable or unwilling to confront the pervasive class inequalities of London, chooses instead to uni-

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versalize the woman's identity and experiences—to transform the homeless woman from a crisis of poverty and politics to one of epistemology.

While this is a familiar critique, I would argue that the novel acknowledges the problem of responsibility at many levels, and that the refusal to narrate the beggar woman's experience must be seen as a humanizing gesture, one that attempts to grant her the same quality of complexity and selfhood as the upper-class characters in the novel. This is one of several moments in the novel that help to highlight the difference between traditional understandings of ethics and Levinas's radical rethinking of the relation between self and other. He does not locate ethics in the sincere attempt to know the other but rather in the self's responsibility for the absolute *unknowability* of that other. Though the text doesn't claim to have the solutions to the questions of poverty and class division, it does acknowledge the depth and significance of the problem by resisting the temptation to draw the beggar woman into a comfortably familiar story. Instead, her presence serves to disrupt the surface of the text, to remind the reader of the limits of both perception and politics, of the existence of responsibilities that can never be completely fulfilled.

This becomes especially clear if we contrast the brief mention of the beggar woman in *Jacob's Room* with a more extended episode in a slightly later Woolf text. Also a novel that tries to do justice to the particularity of postwar London, *Mrs. Dalloway* famously stages several encounters with an apparently homeless woman who sings. In addition to transcribing the actual text of her song ("ee um fah so / foo swee too eem oo" [80]), the narrator engages in a protracted digression on the significance of her lament, ultimately attributing to the woman a kind of universal timelessness, as she is imagined to mourn a long-lost love through an eternity of seasons and ages. We also view the woman through the perspectives of both Peter Walsh and Lucrezia Smith, as Peter rather off-handedly gives her a coin and Lucrezia more actively sympathizes with her by imagining herself in the woman's place and wondering: "Suppose one's father, or somebody who had known one in better days had happened to pass, and saw one standing there in the gutter?" (82).

While this scene can be read as an attempt to acknowledge the existence and potential significance of the most marginalized urban residents, it evades the sort of ethical demand posed by the appearance of the beggar woman in *Jacob's Room*. In *Mrs. Dalloway* Woolf's narrator romanticizes the woman's plight, in effect distancing the reader from the urgent demands

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created by her material circumstances and needs. Peter and Lucrezia each represent a deeply inadequate response to those needs: Peter gives her money, but Woolf clearly suggests that this act has much more to do with Peter's own narrative than the woman's, while Lucrezia's sincere attempt to empathize recapitulates the narrator's futile effort to translate the incoherent singing and finally reveals more abut Lucrezia than the beggar. We readers might see the ineffectual nature of these reactions to the woman's plight, but we are not directly confronted by her resistance to comprehension as we are in the much briefer scene in *Jacob's Room*.

Significantly, it is not merely the beggar's poverty or eccentric behavior that renders her unknowable. *Jacob's Room* represents the extent to which all individuals—beyond differences of gender, race, or class—are inscrutable to each other. In this respect, the novel embodies Levinas's notion that every other is absolutely other:

> The Other is not other with a relative alterity. [. . .] The alterity of the other does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me. [. . .] The Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign. (194)

This ethical dimension of the inaccessibility of others complicates our understanding of the familiar early twentieth-century representations of the alienating modern city. Just as attempts to understand the beggar woman have the effect of widening the gulf between self and other, so too in *Jacob's Room* the urban density that might present opportunities for community or even intimacy in the city fosters instead an even greater sense of anonymity. This dynamic operates, for example, in new modes of public transportation:

> The proximity of the omnibuses gave the outside passengers an opportunity to stare into each other's faces. Yet few took advantage of it. Each had his own business to think of. Each had his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by heart; and his friends could only read the title, James Spalding, or Charles Budgeon, and the passengers going the opposite way could read nothing at all—save "a man with a red moustache", "a young man in grey smoking a pipe". (85)

"Proximity" does not necessarily produce familiarity or connection. But Woolf moves in this passage from a specifically urban phenomenon—no

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one can possibly know or engage with the hundreds of people one encounters every day—to the question of human relationships in general. The essence of the self is "shut" like a book, and even to one's friends only the title, or name, is legible.[8] As in the beggar woman scene, both personal relationships and one's place in the larger public urban sphere are limited, interrupted, and even defined by that radical alterity.

Jacob's Room thus represents the inaccessibility of the truth of individual experience in the city, but without implying some alternative community where relations with others are transparent or communication complete. Importantly, full knowledge is impossible not only for the novel's characters but also for its readers. By employing the metaphor of reading and by treating one's own memory as a kind of text, Woolf implies that every reader of the novel is also a divided subject lacking full access to others and to the self. The problem of knowledge and thus communication does not emerge as an interruption within an otherwise realist narrative; rather, it is both the subject and the underlying condition of the novel itself.

In a second observation of individual behavior in the modern city, Woolf again associates an act of reading (in this case literal) with an image of disconnection. Deploying a familiar modernist trope of urban office workers as automatons, Woolf's narrator accompanies these commuters into the darkness of the London underground:

> Beneath the pavement, sunk in the earth, hollow drains lined with yellow light forever conveyed them this way and that, and large letters upon enamel plates represented in the underworld the parks, squares, and circuses of the upper. "Marble Arch—Shepard's Bush"—to the majority the Arch and the Bush are eternally white letters against a blue ground. Only at one point—it may be Acton, Holloway, Kensal Rise, Caledonian Road—does the name mean shops where you buy things, and houses, in one of which, down to the right, where the pollard trees grow out of the paving stones, there is a square curtained window, and a bedroom. (88–89)

Here we move toward the intimacy of "your" particular bedroom, but the journey is one of estrangement and disconnection. Woolf highlights how the bustling, peopled, distinct neighborhoods and districts of London are reduced to mere nameplates, drained of meaning for all but their

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inhabitants, serving for others only to mark the general passage of time and space within the underground tunnels. As with the passengers on the omnibuses, the act of reading does not solve the problem of the unknown; instead, it emphasizes the distance between the text and the infinitely more complex reality.

Even when one reaches one's destination and takes refuge in the familiar shops, trees, and bedroom, the sense of home is cut off from the larger city, accessible only through a maze of contentless nameplates. The association of a particular subway stop with one's own routine ("the name mean[s] shops where you buy things") suggests how comprehension of the world depends on the particularity of the individual's experience and perception. Not only do the subway passengers know only a single stop, but even two passengers who exit at the same station will associate two different meanings with its name, depending on where each lives and shops. Even as this passage emphasizes the commonness of the urban experience, then, it warns against the assumption that another's experience can be known. And, as in the bus passage, the reader is implicated in this epistemological paradox, as he or she is directly addressed by the narrator.

Many critics have noted that *Jacob's Room* opens with Betty Flanders in the act of writing a letter, and Woolf's characterization of letters in the novel as "the unpublished works of women" (123) has rightly been seen as evidence of her feminist politics.[9] But the narrator's long digression on the rewards and pitfalls of letter writing represents Woolf's importantly ambivalent attitude about the possibiliy of communication and self-representation. Letters become another instance of how an attempt at intimacy and confidence serves to reveal the inaccessibility of the other.

In chapter 8, the narrator pauses to reflect on the nature of written correspondence:

> Let us consider letters—how they come at breakfast, and at night, with their yellow stamps and their green stamps, immortalized by the postmark—for to see one's own envelope on another's table is to realize how soon deeds sever and become alien. Then at last the power of the mind to quit the body is manifest, and perhaps we fear or hate or wish annihilated this phantom of ourselves, lying on the table. (125)

Here letters serve to highlight the problem of the continuity of identity.

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The dated postmark "immortalizes" the content of the letter, allowing the particular—perhaps fleeting, perhaps insincere, certainly partial—self-representation within to outlive the writer and thus to define him or her long after his or her ability to revise the picture is lost. Letters remind us of the separability of self and action, of how quickly our own thoughts, feelings, or writing "sever and become alien." Our envelope on another's table is startling evidence of sentiments that are now not merely dated but also "alien." Thus it is possible to "fear," "hate," or even wish to do away with the version of oneself represented by the mailed letter. Even, perhaps especially, when letters do say what we mean, they betray our fundamental inability to know what we mean, or to mean the same thing from moment to moment as the individual extends through time.

Encountering the other:

ethics of the road not taken

In questioning whether meaningful connection is possible, *Jacob's Room* embraces a Levinasian understanding of ethics, of the asymmetry and radical passivity that is entailed in the responsibility for the absolute otherness of the other. One must not seek the other; the ethical encounter takes place not in response to the self's action but rather as a calling into being of the self. The coming of the other, which constitutes the ethical moment, occurs when it is least expected, when the self is in a state of general receptivity rather than one of direct inquiry. In an urban setting, Woolf suggests, the potential for such moments lurks around every corner, if we will let go of our particular concerns and goals.

Narrating Jacob's experiences as a London clerk, Woolf points to the unpredictability of one's encounter with the city itself:

> The strange thing about life is that though the nature of it must have been apparent to everyone for hundreds of years, no one has left any adequate account of it. The streets of London have their map; but our passions are uncharted. What are you going to meet if you turn this corner? (129)

This passage radically questions the extent to which we are capable of representing the meaning of experience, particularly in a modern urban context. Woolf begins by calling attention to the difference between per-

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ception and representation; though the "nature" of life has been universally "apparent" for centuries, "no one has left any adequate account of it." It is not clear exactly what kinds of accounts are deemed inadequate, but it is tempting to see here a critique of a variety of discourses such as history, philosophy, and even (or perhaps especially) the novel itself. Without adequate guides, each individual must face the mystery of "life" anew.[10]

The passage goes on to address the problem of accountability in relation to city maps. While the "streets of London" may be mapped, such partial guides are insufficient for our "uncharted," and perhaps uncharitable, "passions." Our journeys, Woolf suggests, are mental as well as physical, and the distances we travel cannot adequately be measured in blocks or miles; as when the workers emerge from the underground, one's own city is determined by the particulars of one's own experience, and urban existence is never fully knowable or accounted for: "What are you going to meet if you turn this corner?"

One of the difficulties in navigating the city is the sheer number of possibilities that confront the individual. Though we may routinely ignore these alternative possibilities, Woolf insists they lie just under the surface of our purposeful and directed lives: "'Holborn straight ahead of you,' says the policeman. Ah, but where are you going if instead of brushing past the old man with the white beard, the silver medal, and the cheap violin, you let him go on with his story" (129). Here the text takes a moment to ponder the consequences of allowing people on the street—the blind beggar woman or the old man with a beard—to narrate their own stories. What happens, the novel asks, when we open ourselves to these experiences that seem to lie outside our own, when we subordinate our personal agenda to the call and demands of another? One answer, this passage implies, is that we can be utterly and completely transformed. Accompanying the stranger to his room, where he shows you his prized possessions, may ultimately result in you sitting "on the verge of the marsh drinking rum-punch, an outcast from civilization, for you have committed a crime, are infected with yellow fever as likely as not, and—fill in the sketch as you like" (130). In this brief and mockingly exaggerated digression, the narrator stresses the unpredictability of both life and narrative: each small decision may lead to vast new possibilities, and identity itself is the accumulation of hundreds of such decisions. If you speak to the man on the corner, you may become a different person. For Woolf such ghostly roads not taken haunt our seemingly straightforward lives at every turn.[11] One may go about daily life with a feeling of mastery, unperturbed

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by these alternatives, but they still exist—and with them exists the risk of upsetting all that we think we know: "As frequent as street corners in Holborn are these chasms in the continuity of our ways. Yet we keep straight on" (130).

By both invoking and mocking the possibility of a radically other life lurking at every corner, Woolf acknowledges all that we strive to keep at bay and also the necessity of "keep[ing] straight on," the impossibility of constant openness to all others. Remaining aware, she suggests, of the myriad paths we refuse each moment—by resisting the illusion that our relatively straightforward lives are inevitable or immune to the unpredictable effects of these continuous choices—allows for occasional moments of insight, connection, or true reflection, as we permit that which is outside to interrupt, trouble, or reshape the self. Levinas associates precisely this kind of interruption with the ethical encounter:

> A calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same—is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the other ethics. (43)

For Levinas, the ethical encounter is not created by the self but occurs as a disruption of the self by the other. Similarly, Woolf's novel insists in both its content and formal innovations on the value of calling into question the complacency of "keep[ing] straight on."

What is true of individual lives, this passage implies, may also apply to the novel itself. Allowing the old man with a beard to "go on with his story" not only shifts one's life story but also entails a shift in genre. The resulting scenario—"Where the little boat makes off to the ship, and the ship sails and you behold on the skyline the Azores; and the flamingoes rise" (130)—belongs to the world of the exotic colonial novel by Joseph Conrad or Ryder Haggard. It is a digression not only in "your" life but also in *Jacob's Room,* and if she is going to complete that novel, Woolf must leave this particular "chasm" unexplored in order to "keep straight on," to return, in the next sentence, to the world of Mrs. Durrant's "evening party a few nights back." By the same token, the text is itself haunted by the many stories it does not tell, as we are reminded of the limited and partial nature of representation as well as consciousness, novels as well as lives, and of the ethical responsibility to acknowledge these others even as both readers and writers "keep straight on."

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The "lamp of learning": Irigaray, Levinas, and the ethics of intimacy

Surprisingly, despite the novel's profound skepticism about knowledge, it locates the most significant ethical encounter in the representation of Jacob's education. As a kind of antibildungsroman, *Jacob's Room* spends a lot of time describing Jacob's experiences at Cambridge, which begin in 1906.[12] This section of the novel has understandably drawn its share of feminist analysis, as Jacob's story addresses the ways in which his entire generation (or at least young men of a certain class) was raised and educated in a system that enables violence and war.[13] While this commentary has been valuable, I'd like to suggest that Jacob's time at Cambridge also represents a complex consideration of the questions of knowledge, receptivity, and ethics that saturate the novel as a whole. In particular, Woolf distinguishes between an economic pedagogical mode, in which knowledge is defined as a commodity to be passively ingested, and one that values a mutual exchange of ideas and understanding. Though Woolf is highly critical of the educational institutions of her time, she is also deeply invested in questions of pedagogy and ethics, and she suggests how both Cambridge and the novel itself may sometimes be the locus of a certain "lamp of learning." By recognizing the ambivalence of her representation of the university and drawing on the work of Luce Irigaray to analyze the human relations within it, I hope to suggest an alternative understanding of the feminist ethics of *Jacob's Room*.

It is not difficult to find examples of traditional modes of education in the novel. At some moments, the act of teaching is compared to giving communion: "Sopwith went on talking. Talking, talking, talking—as if everything could be talked—the soul itself slipped through the lips in thin silver disks which dissolve in young men's minds like silver, like moonlight" (51). The professor is cast here as a priest, but the wafers are associated with silver coins, and the student's role is purely passive as he receives the knowledge that will lead to a profession, power, and ultimately war. As the narrator bitingly comments, "It is not simple, or pure, or wholly splendid, the lamp of learning, since if you see them there under its light [. . .] how priestly they look! How like a suburb where you go to see a view and eat a special cake!" (50). Rather than being an opportunity for growth or intellectual development, the experience of university is

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reduced to a mandatory and trivial stop on a young man's life journey, where the requisite information is purchased and consumed.

If the priestly professor represents a process of knowledge acquisition that is determined, predictable, and timeless—and therefore ethically inert—a quite different mode of academic engagement occurs in the students' rooms, as they gather in small groups or especially pairs later in the evening. These scenes are marked by spontaneity, discovery, and the absence of mastery. Though the "sense of concentration in the air" (54) might be attributable to reading or studying, according to the narrator, "it would be dangerous on a hot spring night—dangerous, perhaps, to concentrate too much upon single books, actual chapters, when at any moment the door opened and Jacob appeared" (55). Unlike the earlier rooms of the professors devoted to Greek, science, and philosophy, the residence halls contain a random assortment of interests, personalities, and relationships, and thus imply the possibility of the surprising, the unknown, and the new. The "danger" of specialization, of reducing complexities to a silver coin or a piece of cake, is counteracted by receptivity, by allowing for the unexpected.[14]

As the groups of young men congregate in the rooms, something happens, or is created, though it is not easy to say exactly what:

> The laughter died out, and only gestures of arms, movements of bodies, could be seen shaping something in the room. Was it an argument? A bet on the boat races? Was it nothing of the sort? What was shaped by the arms and bodies moving in the twilight room? (56–57)

While this passage is sometimes read as evidence of the narrator's exclusion from the all-male society of Cambridge, I would argue that the uncertainty of this moment suggests a different reading. At times, after all, the narrator seems to have full access to all-male spaces (as in the scene between Jacob and Simeon I will discuss below). Here the narrator's inability to fill in the outline of the "shape" created by the young men serves to emphasize the unpredictable and indefinable nature of conversations like this one. There is something of value produced by the unplanned congregation of bright young men, but its substance cannot be fully known or represented from outside. This experience exists only in the randomly produced interactions and relationships of a particular moment, and it is important precisely because its content cannot be adequately summarized or reproduced.[15]

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Almost immediately, the narrator calls attention to the fragility of such moments:

> Meanwhile behind [Jacob] the shape they had made, whether by argument or not, the spiritual shape, hard yet ephemeral, as of glass compared with the dark stone of the chapel, was dashed to splinters, young men rising from chairs and sofa corners, buzzing and barging about the room. (58)

The young men's "shape" contrasts with the Cambridge chapel, which is associated in *Jacob's Room* with many of the worst aspects of the university. Just as Sopwith's least sympathetic moments are priestlike, so an earlier scene of the students filing into the church emphasizes misogyny, militarism, and the drag of tradition. In their own rooms, by contrast, the men seem quite removed from the "dark stone" of the chapel, and their "spiritual shape" is neither rule-bound nor passed on through the generations but is clear, light, and "dashed to splinters" as soon as the particular moment in the conversation passes.[16] Just as the exceptional instance of communication and creation cannot be fully described, neither can it last; by its very nature it is fleeting and delicate, and though many such instances may occur, each is singular and temporary.[17]

It is not until still later in the evening, however, when only Jacob remains in Simeon's room, that the most profound instance of intellectual communion and intimacy occurs. In the midst of a discussion of Julian the Apostate, Jacob and Simeon experience an intense sense of connection to each other: "And perhaps Jacob only said 'hum,' or said nothing at all. True, the words were inaudible. It was the intimacy, a sort of spiritual suppleness, when mind prints upon mind indelibly" (59).[18] Whereas Sopwith believes that "everything could be talked," the bond between Jacob and Simeon forms in silence, implying a mode of communication that is not dependent on talk or even language. Perhaps only in such a mode can "mind print upon mind indelibly," an image of a mutual intellectual exchange. This sort of experience clearly goes beyond the fleeting creations of the larger group as well, for the effect on each mind is permanent, "indelible." The language recalls the passage in the diary about the ability to imagine the life of another, including "the infinite possibilities of a succession of days which are furled in him." Here Jacob and Simeon seem aware of the depth of each other's reality and existence.

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In the next moment, it seems possible that the connection between the two men is physical as well as cerebral:

> "Well, you seem to have studied the subject," said Jacob, rising and standing over Simeon's chair. He balanced himself; he swayed a little. He appeared extraordinarily happy, as if his pleasure would brim and spill down the sides if Simeon spoke. (59)

This ejaculatory language is followed by a passage in which the gender associations of the sexual imagery seem much less clear:

> Simeon said nothing. Jacob remained standing. But intimacy—the room was full of it, still, deep, like a pool. Without need of movement or speech it rose softly and washed over everything, mollifying, kindling, and coating the mind with the lustre of pearl.

Here the sense of fluidity and the existence of a "deep pool" of intimacy imply traditional images of female sexuality, while the "lustre of pearl" again might associate the liquid with semen. This androgyny reinforces the sense that Jacob and Simeon have experienced a kind of other-worldly (or "spiritual") communion, one that may have the potential to exceed or subvert Cambridge's traditional strictures of gender, class, and genealogy.

The possibility of physical intimacy in this scene, and its association with a nonappropriative, ethically significant moment of insight and communication between individuals, recalls the debate between Levinas and Irigaray on the ethics of eros. Levinas suggests that the relation between lovers, though related to the ethical encounter between self and other, is finally secondary to the ethical, and is most significant for its element of "fecundity" (267), the production of a son. This aspect of Levinas's writings on ethics has been widely criticized for assuming a masculine self and feminine other and relying on familiar stereotypes of woman as tender, childlike, and virginal:

> The beloved is opposed to me not as a will struggling with my own or subject to my own, but on the contrary as an irresponsible animality which does not speak true words. The beloved, returned to the stage of infancy without responsibility [. . .] has quit her status as a person. (263)[19]

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The interplay of erotics, friendship, and intellectual exchange in the encounter between Jacob and Simeon productively complicates the relationship between eros and ethics. In some ways the scene in the novel evokes Irigaray's critique of Levinas, where she envisions an alternative model of sexual intimacy, one that generates not a child but a renewed life for the lovers themselves:

> In this moment of ultimate sympathy, the feeling and the felt go so far as the vertigo of "getting in over their heads," of immersion in that which does not yet have an individualized form, until they are returned to the deepest level of elementary flux, where birth is not yet sealed up in its identity. [. . .] Causing the possibles to recede, thanks to an intimacy that keeps unfolding itself more and more, opening and reopening the pathway to the mystery of the other. Thus a new birth comes about, a new dawn for the beloved. And the lover. (189)

Woolf and Irigaray employ strikingly similar imagery as each attempts to envision a radically different mode of intimacy: one that preserves otherness even in the midst of intense sympathy and emphasizes the lovers' mutual immersion in the power of the moment rather than one individual's domination or possession of the other. For both writers, this ethical moment of connection involves an alternative sense of discovery and enlightenment:

> an efflorescence that detaches itself from its immersion and absorption in the night's most secret place. Not without sparkling. The light that shines there is different from the one that makes distinctions and separates too neatly. (Irigaray 189)

Irigaray's feminist revision of Levinas allows us to appreciate the ambivalence of Woolf's critique of Cambridge, as *Jacob's Room* explores many possible manifestations of the "lamp of learning."

Unlike Irigaray, however, Woolf seems to exclude women from these intimate and intensely connected encounters. Indeed, the heterosexual relationships portrayed in *Jacob's Room,* as many critics have pointed out, tend to relegate Jacob's lovers to traditionally subservient and stereotypical roles. The intimate moment between Jacob and Simeon is in some ways parallel to the kiss shared by Clarissa and Sally Seton in *Mrs. Dalloway;* in each novel, Woolf represents same-sex relations as fleeting, free of the

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social expectations and constraints of courtship and marriage.[20] The relationship imagined by Irigaray, however, is an importantly heterosexual one, as she works to preserve a sense of difference between male and female lovers without privileging one over the other. Her reading of Levinas is motivated by his failure to incorporate sexual difference into his description of ethics without assuming a male self and an always secondary female other. For both Woolf and Irigaray, however, these scenes of an alternative sexuality attempt to reconcile an ethics of otherness with the feminist values of reciprocity, intimacy, and connection. Woolf anticipates the radical French feminist critique of sexuality by exploring the tension between the sameness—even identity—of young men like Jacob and Simeon and the singularity of the connection forged in a particular, unpredictable moment of intimacy.

Equally important is the extent to which intimacy is linked to lack of movement. In contrast to the busyness and implied productivity of the rest of Cambridge (even the residence halls are compared to a beehive), the intimate moment between Jacob and Simeon does not produce anything. Its value cannot finally be quantified or grasped, but it does exist: "so that if you talk of a light, of Cambridge burning, it's not languages only. It's Julian the Apostate" (59). The moment must be read as a break, as lying outside or beyond the regular stream of a progression that would carry these young men from childhood to Cambridge to an official position in society, thus enabling the making of more wars.

I have emphasized the complexity of Woolf's representation of Jacob's education at Cambridge because the issues of pedagogy, authority, and intimacy raised there structure the novel itself. The feminist critique must not be ignored, but readings of the novel that focus only on Woolf's criticisms of Cambridge risk overlooking the complicated interplay of revulsion and attraction that marks the narrator's response to many aspects of Jacob's experience. The issue of education in the text has crucial implications for the question of whether or how the novel might be said to "teach" its readers. And while the charge of didacticism is most often deployed to condemn a work of literature as heavy-handed or formulaic, I'd like to suggest that Woolf, like George Eliot before her, demonstrates a wide-ranging and subtle understanding of the many ways the relationship between reader and text is steeped in ethics and pedagogy.

In the nineteenth century, Eliot challenged the simplistic idea of the novel as an extended moral example, suggesting instead that literature is

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ethical only insofar as it serves, through truthful representation, to stimulate the reader's capacity for a sympathetic response to others. Though radical for its time, Eliot's understanding of the relationship between the novel and morality is crucially dependent on the possibility of a shared understanding that forms the basis of sympathetic ethical behavior. In *Jacob's Room*, by contrast, Woolf struggles with the question of the role of the novel once faith in a literature capable of speaking in a common language to a known audience—and thus potentially able to inspire or reinforce morally responsible actions—has been eroded. Where Eliot saw in the novel a responsibility to bring the complexity of reality to the reader, to foster the values of community and interdependence, Woolf is suspicious of the possibility of shared comprehension. For her, an easily communicated or common experience can only be an empty one, like the silver coins Sopwith passes to the eager undergraduates. For the novel to have ethical relevance, it cannot be easily digestible, like the suburban cake; it must rather reinforce the resistance of experience to complete and lasting comprehension.

At the same time, however, in the midst of her warnings against the passive ingestion of ideas, Woolf also represents occasional moments of substantive connection between individuals. And just as Jacob's time at Cambridge is punctuated by such moments, so the novel itself reflects, formally, the sense of understanding as problematic and incomplete, fully accessible to the reader only in fleeting flashes of connection. Most importantly, this feeling of authentic communion is only possible because it occurs in the context of an understanding of the difficulty of such an unmediated convergence. As the narrator says of the attempt to know Jacob:

> It seems that a profound, impartial, and absolutely just opinion of our fellow-creatures is utterly unknown. [. . .] life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows. And why, if this and much more than this is true, why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us—why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him. Such is the manner of our seeing. Such the conditions of our love. (96)

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Jacob's Room cannot "teach ethics" through example or by engendering sympathy. Instead, by insisting on the impossibility of easy sympathy, by confronting the reader with the limits of knowledge and representation, the novel lays the groundwork for a different kind of receptivity: not an understanding of the other built on knowledge and talk, a gradual process of bringing self and other closer together, but rather the unpredictable and almost indescribable moment of intimacy, of an unprecedented and unrepeatable event, of "Julian the Apostate."[21]

Jacob's Room thus represents one possible response to the problem of how the novel engages ethically with its subject in the early part of the twentieth century. Rather than attempting to overcome or ignore the prevailing skepticism and uncertainty of her postwar moment, Woolf instead embraces these limitations, making them both the subject matter and mode of her literary representations. Emphasizing the impossibility of full knowledge and the fleeting and unpredictable nature of intimacy between individuals, she rethinks the politics of the relationship between reader and text. Woolf suggests that the role of "character in fiction," so central to her understanding of the modern novel, may finally be to stimulate not sympathy but rather responsibility, to enact the complex relationship between alterity and insight, inaccessibility and intimacy. Exceptional for the depth of its postwar pessimism, *Jacob's Room* nonetheless establishes new possibilities for defining an ethics of modernist form.

Notes

1. Eliot articulates this understanding of realism most famously and explicitly in her 1856 essay "The Natural History of German Life."

2. For a detailed analysis of Woolf's relationship to Eliot, see Alison Booth.

3. Recent considerations of Woolf and ethics include Christine Froula's 2005 book and the 2004 special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* edited by Laura Doyle. Since Mark Hussey's 1991 anthology, there has also been an increased interest in Woolf and war, including books by Alysson Booth and Sharon Ouditt and articles by Margaret Higonnet and Ravit Reichman.

4. In particular, articles by Tamlyn Monson, Jessica Berman, and Tammy Clewell attempt to bring together feminist and poststructuralist approaches to ethics in Woolf. Monson tends to downplay Levinas's insistence on the absolute alterity between self and other, while Berman and Clewell turn to Deleuze and Derrida, respectively, to reconcile the two approaches.

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5. In a frequently cited passage from her diary in which Woolf anticipates writing *Jacob's Room*, she declares that she has

> arrived at some idea of a new form for a new novel. [. . .] For I figure that the approach will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist.
>
> (January 1920, 2: 13–14)

6. Though it discusses neither Levinas nor *Jacob's Room*, Natalia Rosenfeld's book shares my interest in Woolf's negotiation between distance and connection: "It is this resurrection that Woolf's prose continually works for, in an evolving effort not so much to reconcile opposites as to imagine the varied configurations formed by difference" (5).

7. I was first alerted to this quotation in Froula's reading of *Mrs. Dalloway*, where she argues that Clarissa represents Woolf's recently deceased friend Kitty Maxse (93–96).

8. As Rachel Bowlby points out in discussing this passage, reading never results in complete comprehension, even of the self:

> While the passage at first sight implies that "each" person has a full, inside knowledge of himself or herself, compared to which knowledge of others is only partial, the reading metaphor dispels this distinction by taking away the unity of the self-reader, and thereby puts into focus the partiality, in both senses, of any reading of another, including the reader.
>
> (86)

9. See Kate Flint for an analysis of Woolf's revisions of the novel in relation to women's voices.

10. See Bowlby (92–94) for a reading of this passage in terms of the distinction between character and type.

11. In his article on *Jacob's Room* and law, Reichman notes a similar tension in Woolf's description of a policeman:

> Even the most resolute determination, however, cannot silence the persistent pulse of emotion underneath the order it safeguards—and Woolf's novel can be understood as an attempt to reach these "sudden impulses" by other, unauthorized means. (10)

12. The idea that *Jacob's Room* is a story of Jacob's development only in an ironic sense has been suggested by several critics. As Judy Little remarks, "Jacob's transformation from 'innocence' to 'knowledge' is parodic, not real. His only

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'knowledge' is the uncomfortable sensation of a hook dragging in his side" (117). Alex Zwerdling similarly refers to the novel as a "satiric elegy" (62).

13. The representation of Jacob's education as an elitist male institution that leads to war is emphasized in analyses by Ouditt, Clewell, Froula, de Gay, Flint, Zwerdling, and Neverow"s "Thinking Back through Our Mothers." While these feminist readings importantly stress Woolf's criticism of the British university system, I think they overlook the ambivalence of this critique in *Jacob's Room*.

14. For this understanding of ethics as the arrival or surprising occurrence of that which is other (the *"arrivant"*), I am drawing on Derrida's later works, especially *Specters of Marx*. Derrida's work on ethics is of course heavily influenced by Levinas, and throughout this article my own sense of ethics and otherness is informed by both writers. I do, however, find Levinas's articulation of the absolute alterity of the other in *Totality and Infinity* especially helpful for bringing out the depth of Woolf's rethinking of the basis of ethics in the novel.

15. Woolf's devastating criticisms of the British educational system and its exclusion of women, perhaps most fully realized in *Three Guineas,* must not of course be overlooked. At the same time, however, she also writes in the 1921–22 essay "Old Bloomsbury" of the value of her and her sister's participation in the Thursday evening gatherings at 46 Gordon Square:

> Never have I listened so intently to each step and half-step in an argument. Never have I been at such pains to sharpen and launch my own little dart. And then what joy it was when one's contribution was accepted. [. . .] From such discussions Vanessa and I got probably much the same pleasure that undergraduates get when they meet friends of their own for the first time. (190)

I am indebted to Ann Banfield's study of Woolf's relationship to the philosophy of Roger Fry and Bertrand Russell for highlighting Woolf's generally positive assessment of the male-dominated "conversational societies" of Cambridge and Bloomsbury.

16. Woolf makes a similar distinction between the permanence of religion and the fragile nature of true learning in *Three Guineas,* as she describes the ideal university for women: "It must be built not of carved stone and stained glass, but of some cheap, easily combustible material which does not hoard dust and perpetuate traditions. Do not have chapels" (143).

17. Again remembering the Thursday evenings in "Old Bloomsbury," Woolf emphasizes their impermanence:

> They deserve to be recorded and described. Yet how difficult—how

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> impossible. Talk—even the talk which had such tremendous results upon the lives and characters of the two Miss Stephens [Virginia and Vanessa]—even talk of this interest and importance is as elusive as smoke. It flies up the chimney and is gone. (186–87)

18. Julian the Apostate was emperor of Rome from 361 to 363. My reading of this scene does not emphasize the particular content of the debate between Jacob and Simeon but focuses on intellectual conversation in general as an occasion of intimacy.

19. Luce Irigaray and Tina Chanter have written extensively on Levinas and eros.

20. In "The Return of the Great Goddess" Neverow locates the possibility of an alternative sexuality in *Jacob's Room* in the relationships between women.

21. Here, following Woolf, I am using "Julian the Apostate" to refer to the exceptional moment of emotional and intellectual intimacy between Jacob and Simeon.

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Reviews

Writing Jewish

Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature
by Hana Wirth-Nesher
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. 224 pages

Irene Tucker

Hana Wirth-Nesher's *Call It English* tells the story of a group of twentieth-century American fiction writers who call the language in which they write their narratives English. In calling "it" English, the writers Wirth-Nesher gathers under this banner register the degree to which English is not merely a language to be used but a problem, an aspiration, an object of mourning, a reification. What Wirth-Nesher traces in her collection of readings of works ranging from the short stories, novels, and memoirs of immigrant writers Abraham Cahan and Mary Antin to second- and third-generation Jewish American writers like Philip Roth, Aryeh Lev Stollman, and Myla Goldberg, is the shifting presence of Yiddish and Hebrew in their largely English-language narratives. And to the degree that English is, for them, something always requiring at least a second thought, it is never quite the exclusive topic of Wirth-Nesher's book. In that sense, the imperative of her title, which she borrows from Henry Roth's 1934 novel *Call It Sleep,* insists too much, deliberately. (Or you could call it Yiddish. Or Hebrew.)

Inasmuch as the writers whose work she discusses move from those whose native spoken language was Yiddish through those who grew up as English-speaking children of Yiddish-speaking parents to what Cynthia Ozick describes as "the first generation to think and speak and write wholly in English . . . since the coming forth from Egypt five millennia ago" (Ozick 9, qtd. in Wirth-Nesher 128), we might be tempted to understand the narrative Wirth-Nesher offers here to be a familiar story of assimilation, with local details thrown in for color. It is the achievement of *Call It English* and its particular focus on the shifting relations of Yiddish and Hebrew not only to English but to one another that it operates

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to reveal the inadequacy of that assimilation narrative. In part, Nesher's erudite and textured readings uncover an emotional ambivalence among certain writers about the movement from "calling it English" to English unmodified and un-urged. In the very same passage in which she marks her generation's status as exclusive English speakers, writers, and thinkers, Ozick goes on to declare, "English is a Christian language. When I write English, I live in Christendom." But Ozick is not merely lamenting an alienation from a cultural past that becomes authentic to the very degree to which it is no longer accessible. As Wirth-Nesher elaborates in her final chapter, while Jews have been positioned on the multicultural map over the past two decades as white Euro-Americans, such a definition does not reflect the fact that "their countries of origin are not their cultural homeland," and that "religion is not a significant cultural signifier in America (where faith is a private matter and shared across racial and ethnic lines)" (162). In Wirth-Nesher's narrative, Hebrew largely supplants Yiddish over the course of the twentieth (and twenty-first) century as the "Jewish language" in relation to and against which Jewish American writers define their own English writing and speaking. To be sure, the disappearance of Yiddish can be cast in the most banal narrative of immigrant assimilation as English replaces Yiddish as the language of these writers' everyday interactions. But the fact that, from the outset, Yiddish has been both denigrated and relied upon as an alternative to the *loshn-koydesh* [holy tongue] Hebrew in which these same Jews prayed and studied, and from which the language drew its alphabet and significant elements of its vocabulary, means that the use of Yiddish can no more be cleanly cast off than it was unambivalently embraced. And in that sense, Wirth-Nesher's narrative is powerful—and historically resonant—as much for what stays the same within it as for the transformations it registers.

In this spirit, Wirth-Nesher opens her study with an overview not merely of the labile relation of Hebrew and Yiddish but of Jewish bilingualism as it is practiced and theorized. A decade after the 1908 Czernowitz (Bukovina) Conference, during which prominent Yiddish (mainly Socialist-Bundist) writers and activists had made a play to elevate the cultural prestige of Yiddish literature in the context of a nascent (and ideologically Hebraist) Zionist movement by proclaiming Yiddish "a Jewish national language," (many radical conferees had pressed to declare it *the* exclusive Jewish language), Baal Makhshoves [Israel Isadore Elyashev] observed that the mark of Jewish literature has always been its bilingual-

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ism. Moreover, this trend did not begin with the emergence of Yiddish in middle and eastern Europe but operated even at the moments Hebrew supposedly reigned supreme: the Book of Daniel moves back and forth between Hebrew and Chaldean; the Pentateuch and prayer book interweave Hebrew and Aramaic, and Arabic is featured prominently in medieval Jewish philosophical writing. Such bilingualism did not always exhaust a Jew's daily linguistic range, Wirth-Nesher reminds us. "Even the shtetl dweller with little formal secular education, such as Sholem Aleichem's Tevye, negotiated between the *mame-loshen* (mother tongue) of domestic and worldly Yiddish and the *loshn-koydesh*, the holy tongue of Hebrew-Aramaic. By necessity, he would also have acquired enough Ukrainian to secure his income as a dairyman." (6)

As a framing context for the rest of her study, what such an account makes apparent is that it is not simply the general fact of a persistent Jewish bilingualism that matters for the ways in which Jewish American authors come to think about writing in English, but the particular distributions of languages across a given individual's daily activities that structure twentieth-century writers' movements into something resembling (but only resembling) English monolingualism. In emigrating from Europe to the United States, Jews, in marked contrast with most of the southern and middle European groups who arrived around the same time, did not go from being a linguistic national majority to a linguistic minority. At the same time, as we have seen, Jewish bilingualism could not be straightforwardly mapped across lines distinguishing majority and minority cultures, and, as a consequence, they were not easily aligned with the Jewish immigrant's experience of before and after. Because Jews' engagement with Hebrew texts was explicitly figured as an alternative to a geographical homeland, actual geographical displacement was understood as communally insignificant.

> The male rite of passage to adulthood (bar mitzvah) has always been public performance of Hebrew literacy that entails vocal, hermeneutic and ceremonial skills. . . . Acquiring rudimentary Hebrew literacy to enable participation in other rites of passage, such as weddings and funerals, and observance of holy days, has been an inherent feature of Jewish experience regardless of geographical location. (14)

Thus when the prominent Yiddish journalist Abraham Cahan ventures

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in one stroke into fiction-writing and English-language publication, the fact that he renders Yiddish-reported speech in standard English and English words in italics as a kind of phoneticized dialect has as much to do with the longstanding conception of Yiddish as a pointedly spoken "folk language" as it does with the status of dialect in the explicitly American project of local-color realism advocated by Cahan's most tireless promoter, William Dean Howells. Wirth-Nesher recounts in fascinating detail the process by which Cahan's proposed title for his first English novel, "Yankel the Yankee," is transformed, at Howells's urging, into the title under which it was eventually published, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*. In his 1928 (Yiddish-language) memoir, Cahan recalls Howells's objection to the alliteration in "Yankel the Yankee," which Howells felt to be contrived and unrealistic: "all right for vaudeville, but not for a story like yours" (qtd. in Wirth-Nesher 39). But Wirth-Nesher goes on to offer persuasive evidence that Howells's preference for "Yekl" over "Yankel" is drawn not from the former name's prevalence in the streets of the "New York Ghetto" evoked in Howells's subtitle but from the character "Jakel [Yekl] the Fool" in Heine's fragmentary novel *The Rabbi of Bacherach* (1840), a character whose name and whose talk both take place in a mock Frankfurt dialect the reader is meant to take as proto-Yiddish. What Howells frames as a preference for a barely mediated report from the opaquely non–English-speaking front by a native informer over the distorting stylization of the folk genre of vaudeville thus turns out to be the elevation of a more historically distant, canonical, and naturalized genre over a contemporary popular one, all in the name of realism.

What is most remarkable about Wirth-Nesher's approach is that such accounts of the degree to which these putatively English narratives still bear the marks of their emergence from the complex linguistic habits of twentieth-century Jewish American culture are not simply presented by way of spot literary histories like that of the Cahan-Howells encounter but close and nuanced readings of texts. Thus when a normally Yiddish-speaking immigrant in *Yekl* ventures into a phoneticized English, it is to proclaim, "America for a country and *'dod'l do'* [that'll do] for a language!" Wirth-Nesher observes, "In order to make this comic pun accessible to an American reader, Cahan added the explanation in brackets" (33). But, she goes on,

> The words that require "translation" for the American reader, ironically, are only the ones actually uttered in English but

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> rendered phonetically. The homonymous conflation of "dod'l do" and "Doodle" as in Yankee Doodle is evidence only if the English words "that'll do" are pronounced with a Yiddish accent. Since Cahan cannot rely on his reader's recognizing this, or his ability to reproduce the sounds that will yield the pun, he provides the gloss. . . . To be in the position of fully understanding this pun, the reader needs both to invoke American culture—Yankee Doodle—and to reproduce the sounds that the immigrant makes, to be American and, while reading this work, also foreign. (34)

It is in these readings, moreover, that Wirth-Nesher's erudition becomes most evident. In a reading late in *Call It English* of Cynthia Ozick's bipartite novella *The Shawl,* Wirth-Nesher analyzes Ozick's decision to use a fragment of Paul Celan's German-language poem *Todesfuge* [Deathfugue] as the epigraph for a story of an assimilated, German-speaking Jew who is forced to witness her daughter being fatally flung against an electrified fence by the Nazis. The Celan poem juxtaposes images of the "ashen-haired Shulamith," whose name is associated with the Rose of Sharon, the "female emblem of beauty and desire celebrated in the Song of Songs" (Wirth-Nesher 137), and by implication with the witnessing mother Rosa and the "golden-haired Margarete," whose name evokes the object of desire of Goethe's Faust. Wirth-Nesher informs us that Goethe himself translated the Song of Songs from Hebrew into German and evoked some of the most sensuous lines of the biblical text in the young witch's lewd remarks in *Faust.* In offering such literary and linguistic entanglements in the form of an epigraph, Wirth-Nesher suggests, Ozick insists that Celan's post-Holocaust German is the medium for the coexistence of Margarete and Shulamith as well as for the Jewish mother Rosa and her murdered child—and, at the same time, that it can only function as epigraph, as an apostrophe that can only address a listener who is no longer there (137–38).

The larger trajectory of Wirth-Nesher's argument becomes most apparent in *Call It English*'s final chapter, where she identifies and analyzes the peculiar grip on the late twentieth-century Jewish American literary imagination exerted by the kaddish, the prayer that Rabbi Israel Goldstein called "the irreducible minimum of Jewish religious allegiance." As I have already suggested, *Call It English* takes it upon itself to demonstrate how, over the course of the twentieth century, Hebrew comes to take

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the place of Yiddish as the primary Jewish language in relation to which Jewish American writers define and imagine their use of English. The transformation Wirth-Nesher identifies is not simply a shift in linguistic allegiance but a shift in the status of the language in question, a kind of transcendentalizing that takes place as writers move from engaging with a language they once spoke or still speak but have chosen not to write in to praying for a dead parent in a language that is resonant to the very degree that it is seldom used but always remembered. The sort of transcendentalizing Wirth-Nesher describes is not simply marked by the kaddish but reconstrues the prayer as well. As she explains it, the kaddish originally had nothing to do with bereavement (and indeed in its literal language still does not) but was a prayer praising God's sovereignty and expressing faith in Israel's messianic redemption that came to be associated with death because it was customary for the bereaved family to devote a portion of each day of their week-long mourning to studying Jewish texts, a daily ritual that would conclude in the standard way of all prayer assemblages, with the recitation of the kaddish. Jewish American authors ranging from, most famously, Allen Ginsberg to Joanna Kaplan, Max Apple, and Tony Kushner refer to, quote, fragment, and misremember the kaddish because, Wirth-Nesher argues, "it is a fixed liturgy that has not lent itself to interpretation, accommodation, or revision" (166). Where the Passover seder takes up as part of its ritual the question of the historicity of (its own) communal practice and is practiced in a variety of forms, the kaddish has come to function as "a signifier of the essence of Judaism or Jewishness." The centrality of the kaddish to late twentieth-century Jewish American literary practice testifies to a thinness of contemporary Jewish communal life, a Judaism that has come to resemble the theological and social forms of American Protestantism:

> Instead of telling a story, [the kaddish] praises God; instead of placing the reciter on a historical continuum, it removes him from the temporal. Instead of including all of the assembled in a collective action, it enlists the congregation to enable the single mourner to fulfill his duties. It is not linked to a specific holy day, but rather to the calendar of the bereaved, to the timetable of his grief. Nor is it associated with any natural or seasonal cycle. It is one individual marking one personal loss by praising one God in public. (166)

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While I am largely persuaded by the case Wirth-Nesher makes for the authors whose work she engages, I want to suggest that her discussion of the significance of the kaddish makes apparent some limits to her approach as well. Her observation about the significance of the pointedly nonnarrative aspects of the kaddish made me wish that she had more consistently used her subtle and learned spot readings of moments of striated linguistic knowledge to occasion reflection on questions of genre and narrative. I also found myself wondering about the comprehensiveness of the cultural history she presents. While it certainly seems true that Hebrew has largely supplanted Yiddish as the language through which American Jews come to announce and define their Jewishness, can this movement into Hebrew be thoroughly aligned with the kind of transcendentalizing impulse she associates with the new centrality of the kaddish? In this regard, we might do well to draw a distinction between second- and third-generation writers: the revival of Hebrew as a spoken idiomatic language in Israel with a rich and varied secular literature has made its way into Jewish American cultural experience as well. Jewish American writers who came of age after the Six-Day War are far more likely to have spent extended amounts of time in Israel or at Hebrew-speaking summer camps, to have experienced Hebrew as a spoken language and to speak it themselves, than their parents were. Wirth-Nesher's local readings of the work of the youngest of the contemporary novelists she reads—writers including Myla Goldberg and Aryeh Lev Stollman—suggest that something new is afoot, but these newest trends seem only gestured toward in Wirth-Nesher's overarching analysis. However, these quibbles remain merely that, wonderings at the edges of what is fundamentally a fascinating and informative study.

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Journalistic Modernism

Modernism on Fleet Street
by Patrick Collier
Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006. 257 pages

Debra Rae Cohen

Operating at the intersection of recent "new modernist" revaluations of consumption, promotion, and relations between modernism and mass culture, Patrick Collier's provocative study establishes a complex pattern of negotiation between modernist practitioners and the press, centering around early twentieth-century anxieties about newspapers as "a threat to British civic and cultural life" (2). Though Collier acknowledges that the newspaper was "a natural strawman for the aesthetic project of modernism" (4), he emphasizes, rather, that "the distinction between journalism and literature was part of the structure of thought through which contemporaries viewed the print marketplace, part of the intellectual matrix in which modernism took shape" (202). Thus no writer of the period, says Collier, could stay aloof from what T. S. Eliot termed "the journalistic struggle"; "one could neither ignore the opportunities offered by periodicals nor refrain from taking a position in the widespread discussion of the state of British journalism" (3).

Collier's fascinating first chapter, after a brief overview of changing conditions in journalism at the turn of the century, outlines the various strands of this discussion, tracing concerns about the debased nature of the public sphere that resulted from the perceived threat of a newly enlarged and literate "public" seen often as "volatile, unpredictable, inscrutable" (18). The projection of a half-educated, sprawling, and undifferentiated public led to fears not only for the intellectual but also for the political health of the nation, with newspaper proprietors seen as stoking the appetite of "the public" for scandal, commercialism, and catchwords. Collier is careful to distinguish here between commentators who saw newspapers as reflecting the debased tastes of the public and those who "saw themselves critiquing the press *on behalf of* a public that needed better information" (22)—between those, in other words, whose impulses were primarily antidemocratic and those whose were the reverse. Yet

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these impulses often coexisted, as Collier's analyses of individual writers make clear. His subsequent chapters—on T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Rose Macaulay, and Rebecca West—take a series of cross-bearings on these questions, with each case study centering on a particular issue within the journalistic debates. His chapter on T. S. Eliot, for example, focuses on Eliot's perception that journalism had helped to erode the English language and thus bring about cultural and national decline. Eliot's campaign for a reinvigorated language was dependent on his self-crafting as a literary arbiter—an image, ironically, initially "constructed and promoted *through* journalism" even as it was defined in opposition *to* journalism (54). Eliot, Collier convincingly shows, rejected the very notion of a healthy contemporary public sphere as "an undifferentiated mass of ideas"; he supported instead the model of an elite coterie, a *"minority* public sphere . . . that cooperatively seeks truth within its border but does not engage with the larger, debased society" (61).

In chapter 3, "Virginia Woolf and the Conditions of Reviewing," Collier engages in a subtle correction of much recent Woolf scholarship, sensitively probing the limits of Woolf's progressive politics of reading. Tracing in her essays a shifting attitude toward the reading public, he notes the growing conflict between her "gendered critique of professionalism" (94), figured as the ceding of critical authority to the "common reader," and her intermittently expressed distrust of the untrained audience's ability to navigate the choices of a saturated book market. "Holding these tensions in equilibrium," argues Collier, "became more difficult as external forces pushed Woolf toward a more pessimistic view of the public." In the 1930s, her "conception of readers as a republic" and the faith in a literary public sphere it implied "could not withstand the pressure of looming global conflict" (100).

Chapter 4 necessarily proceeds according to a different analytic protocol than Collier's other chapters, since James Joyce was not a prolific journalistic contributor and did not make in his own voice extended statements about the role of the press. Collier weighs Joyce's depictions of the press in *Dubliners* and *Ulysses,* arguing that Joyce saw "reformative potential in print culture" (116), particularly as a tool for Irish liberation, but condemned its "assertive, normative" (109) role in relation to private behaviors. The specter of the Parnell case, in which press exposure of the politician's affair with Katharine O'Shea led to his humiliation and ruin, serves as the template for Leopold Bloom's own anxieties of exposure.

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Drawing on this evidence, Collier finds in *Ulysses* a severe critique of newspaper practices, yet one, paradoxically, conducted "from a marginal position" separated from the public sphere; located "in a textual space unavailable to both consumers and practitioners of British journalism," Joyce's criticisms miss those readers the novel "arguably sought to liberate" (134).

Intriguing in its own right, this chapter nevertheless sits uncomfortably within the study, not solely because of the methodological divergence but because of Collier's own earlier emphasis on the importance of the national character of the public sphere. Although he makes clear both Joyce's recognition of the importance of newspapers in fostering Irish identity and his sophisticated understanding of the English journalistic scene, the chapter only has room to gesture toward, rather than fully explore, the implications of these interactions for the dynamic of *Ulysses*. (One wishes Collier had had the space to engage with the rich literature on "Nausicaa," for instance, or Mark Wollaeger's recent work on Joyce and propaganda.) In fact, although Collier throughout this study de-emphasizes the transnational nature of many of the journalistic statements he reports—Joyce's most overt comments about the English press, for instance, were published in Trieste—this very elision points toward exciting new work to be done in this field. Transatlantic journalistic transactions, for example, played a particular and as yet undertheorized role in modernist self-fashioning: when Rebecca West, as Collier notes, attributed the American lack of a "clear conception of civic order" (178) to the country's vastness, and thus its lack of a single coherent public venue for debate, she was already beginning to derive much of her income from American periodicals.

Collier's last two chapters are perhaps his most successful, not only because the central issues on which they focus—newspapers' definition of the public and the role of the press in a democracy—are at the core of his concerns but also because the writers he treats, Rose Macaulay and Rebecca West, generally located just outside and under the fringes, respectively, of the expanding "modernist" umbrella, were far more dependent on and involved with the "journalist struggle" than his other subjects. The two writers provide an interesting study in contrasts. Although both resist the temptation to blame the public for journalistic inanity, they locate responsibility, and also hope for the public sphere, differently. Macaulay's satirical and sometimes self-mocking voice often questioned the premises

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of the journalistic assignments she undertook, inviting readers "to share her ironic stance" in order to critique the institution of journalism by way of journalism itself, thus indicting not the reading public so much as the "depraved taste" of editors and publishers who demean that public (159). Collier argues that Macaulay, whose journalistic ventures involved a variety of venues with distinct and varied readership, saw in the very heterogeneity of the reading public the possibility of "rehabilitation of the public sphere," although, he cautions, "this more nuanced sense of the public did not always guarantee a sanguine view of the future of democracy, nor was it a position she could always maintain" (140). By contrast, Collier attributes to Rebecca West a deep-seated faith in the potential for a vital and unitary public sphere and a commitment to journalism as "a force for social advancement and reform" (172)—a "classically liberal belief in progress" (179) that she needed to sustain in new ways and with new rationalizations under the strain of 1930s conditions. West's anti-Eliotic modernism, her belief in the necessity of both art and journalism for human progress, manifested itself in a refusal to see experimental writing as necessarily elite and a concomitant effort to "mainstream modernism" by means of journalistic intervention (173): "Revitalizing art's public mission would require not a minority composed of critical minds who speak only to one another, but popularizing minds that reach out to the public" (195).

West's conception of the interdependence of art and politics, which she sees as operating through dialectical "correction through give-and-take" (196), makes her in some sense an exemplar within this study; yet Collier stresses that even her pedagogical embrace of the potentialities of journalism is tied to an anachronistic free-speech model of the public sphere "grounded on a metaphor of face-to-face conversation" (202), a model "derived from an exclusive, relatively unmediated public sphere" (204) and thus inappropriate to modern conditions. It was their cultural dependence on this model, argues Collier, that rendered so knotty, for these writers, the problem of locating a viable public sphere in the modernist era. "Simply put," says Collier, "people wanted an unmanageably vast, heterogeneous flow of discourse to aggregate into one central conversation" (204).

Collier's study is perhaps especially valuable in identifying the deep-seated conflicts evoked by the insistent awareness of the press as an inescapable mediator of the possibilities of such "conversation." Yet his very

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language as he points to the anxieties provoked by marketplace conditions as a "deeply embedded trope" (71) within the works of modernists begs the question of whether Collier does not limit himself unduly by relying on the overt statements of these writers about journalism itself; there's clearly much to be said about the *unacknowledged* effects of journalism, both political and formal, within the works of even the writers he treats. But this erudite and nuanced volume is enormously useful both in defining the terms of the interactions of modernism and Fleet Street and in pointing to issues that now call for further investigation.

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Collecting Elizabeth Bishop

Elizabeth Bishop, Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments
edited and annotated by Alice Quinn
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. 367 pages

Susan Rosenbaum

This new collection of previously unpublished writing by Elizabeth Bishop is a welcome addition to her body of work, one which should appeal to the Bishop specialist and the general reader alike. Bishop was famously reluctant to publish anything that didn't meet her exacting standards: she often worked on poems for years or even decades, with the slightness of her literary output testifying to her unerring ability to distinguish between the finished and unfinished work. As anyone who has visited the Bishop archive at the Vassar College Library knows, however, the material deemed unfinished is both plentiful and fascinating. This collection of "poems, drafts, and fragments" culled from the Vassar archive not only provides us with some poems certain to enter the Bishop canon but no less importantly illuminates Bishop's writing process and poetic ideals, yielding a wealth of new perspectives on the work she chose to publish during her lifetime.

The appearance of this collection has sparked vigorous debate among Bishop's admirers, with some readers suggesting that, given Bishop's literary perfectionism, she would not have approved of its publication. Bishop's "Crusoe in England" perhaps best expresses her ambivalence about the posthumous fate of her literary remains. Crusoe, contemplating the local museum's request for the remnants of his island sojourn—"the flute, the knife, the shrivelled shoes, / my shedding goatskin trousers / (moths have got in the fur)"—asks, "How can anyone want such things?" (*Complete Poems* 166). Although Crusoe's relics occasion painful memories of everyday hardship ("the knife there on the shelf— // How many years did I / beg it, implore it, not to break?"), the museum's request signifies the more general alienation Crusoe feels from his past as he is subsumed into its legend; he comments of his knife that it "won't look at me at all. / The living soul has dribbled away." Through Crusoe Bishop conveys an acute

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awareness of the costs of allowing one's artifacts—redolent with private memory and feeling—to meet the public's uncomprehending, perhaps voyeuristic gaze through the agency of the museum or collection. And yet in the poem Crusoe does not turn down the museum's request for his objects, and neither did Bishop.

In fact, Bishop not only saved all of the unfinished poems and drafts that appear in Quinn's collection but, as her biographer Brett Millier notes, hoped to sell her unpublished writings (540), suggesting that she envisioned the public gaining some kind of access to them. If her own treatment of questions of literary reception can serve as a guide, then at some level, in spite of her deep ambivalence, she hoped that her readers would find their way to these writings. In a 1975 letter that Quinn quotes in the notes to the collection, Bishop responds to a Miss Pierson who has sought advice on poetry (249). Bishop recommends reading the great poets of the past, then the great poets of the twentieth century, here cautioning Miss Pierson to read "not just 2 ot 3 poems each, in anthologies—read ALL of somebody. Then read his or her life, and letters, and so on. (And by all means read Keats's Letters.) Then see what happens." In this instance Bishop suggests the importance of letters and biography to a full appreciation of a writer's work. Even if in her own case she couldn't contemplate this kind of self-exposure without feelings of shame or horror, in saving her journals, letters, and drafts she seemed to understand the necessity, even the desirability, of receiving full historical treatment as a major writer. If we look at how other major twentieth-century writers have been treated, we see a clear precedent for publishing drafts and uncollected works, with the understanding that these posthumous collections are meant to supplement and illuminate, not tarnish, the record of the published works.

The Bishop archive at Vassar College presented Quinn with several challenges in selecting and editing the collection. The archive contains drafts of published works as well as unpublished poems, unpublished prose, notebooks and travel diaries, personal and professional correspondence, financial and legal documents, artwork, biographical material, and memorabilia. Quinn's aim, in her own words, was to "present a thoroughly representative selection of the draft material in the archive" (xvii) with an emphasis on work that demonstrates "artistic ambition" or "biographical significance." This selection process was complicated by the fact that in many cases, there are multiple drafts—even as many as a dozen or more

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drafts—of poems, often spanning years or even decades. While in some cases the chronology of drafts is clear, this is not always true. Quinn has organized the collection in approximate chronological order, but she emphasizes that her ordering of the material "is in no manner definitive," and in her extensive notes to the poems she discusses the sources (letters, notebooks, biographies, and scholarship) that helped her to date the material. Moreover, while Bishop typed some drafts, she wrote others by hand, and her small, cramped handwriting is difficult to decipher. Quinn's policy was to choose "the most coherent, intact draft—the fullest and/or most legible available—rather than opt for a less decipherable or less complete version of a more advanced draft" (xvii–xviii). She discusses revisions and variants, but short of publishing a facsimile edition of all the drafts of a given poem, the reader must trust Quinn's choices.

To her credit, Quinn is very clear about the "considerable guesswork" (xiii) and uncertainty involved in presenting unfinished work. Her decision to publish several of the drafts in facsimile was in this sense judicious: by studying a handwritten draft such as that of "Florida Revisited," marked with Bishop's cross-outs and revisions, the reader is able to measure the difficulty of Quinn's editorial task. I found myself disagreeing at times with her transcriptions of these facsimiles, but in this way I better understood the painstaking labor and "guesswork" that was involved in putting together the collection. Quinn has devised a system of notation that typographically indicates this uncertainty, allowing the reader to register words that Bishop crossed out, words that Quinn has guessed at, and words or phrases that were too difficult to decipher. Some readers will disagree with Quinn's decision to correct spelling and add punctuation in cases "where it is clear [Bishop] would have employed it"—this is tricky business for a poet who (in "Arrival at Santos") intentionally breaks a line "Glens Fall / s, New York" (*Complete Poems* 89–90)—but a more readable collection results. Quinn notes in the prefatory materials that Bishop had entirely crossed out some of the drafted poems, including "Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box," the poem that titles the collection. One wishes that Quinn had not simply listed these crossed-out poems in the preface but had noted this fact on the drafts themselves, for surely this threshold between legibility and illegibility, perhaps indicating Bishop's desire to both preserve and erase the poems, is potentially an important frame for reading them. We might even regard these crossed-out drafts as an apt figure for the collection itself: an archive that Bishop preserved but screened.

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In this regard it's worth dwelling on one of the newly collected drafts, "The Museum," taken from one of Bishop's Key West notebooks:

> Dear—please let's go back
> to that little provincial museum,
> & through its little rooms again,
>
> gray-green beads & various valises
> other objects worthless value
> or unauthenticated
>
> Please let's go back
>
> No I can't imagine what
> those stone things were ever used for.
> & This time let us translate
> the labels more carefully
>
> on brownish paper, as if scorched
> printed in a quaint / black / type. 19th cent.
>
> Some of them had slipped
> to the bottom of the cases & lay
> face down, or stood on one corner.
>
> Some of the rooms were dim
> dry smell or a damp smell
>
> A column of sunlight fell
> clear & thin & alive
> almost like a stream of water—
> alive as a stream of water
> as if it lived there
> commenting fastidiously on lighting— (72)

As the embodiment of a kind of historical fate, the provincial museum promises obscurity, a quiet graveyard: the labels that might indicate the origin, name, or use of the museum artifacts have slipped and lie "face down," unreadable, like old gravestones. Although the column of sunlight

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as an ideal of life and clarity provides a stark contrast to the museum's decay and disorder, even it is subject to the morbid environment, becoming an exhibit "commenting fastidiously on lighting." The poem evidences Bishop's sense of the inevitable loss and slippage of meaning that befalls a collection due to the passage of time, an understanding of the archive important to keep in mind as one reads—and I suspect inevitably misreads—transcriptions of drafted poems whose origins and end points are often unclear or unknowable.

And yet the speaker wants to go back to the little museum, seeming to enjoy its tranquil disorder, with a not unrelated feeling of responsibility: "this time let us translate / the labels more carefully." The tour of the provincial museum invites a kind of aesthetic contemplation that Bishop prized, and we might follow her lead as we engage her own "provincial museum." Quinn's notes to the collection are exemplary in this regard, notable for their sense of responsibility to and pleasure in the materials at hand. In her introduction Quinn writes,

> It's my hope that this book will provide an adventure for readers who love the established canon, enabling them to hear echoes and make connections based on their own intuitions and close reading of both the finished and the unfinished poems. (xv)

The notes, while idiosyncratic, provide a sense of this adventure and are enjoyable to read: Quinn comments on relevant biographical, literary, and historical contexts for the poems and suggests connections to and resonances with other Bishop works. The notes constitute a helpful addition to Brett Millier's and Lorrie Goldensohn's biographies; given the wealth of detail and cross-referencing in the notes, however, an index would benefit the reader.

With this ideal of echoes and new connections in mind, what new perspectives does the collection enable? As Quinn's notes demonstrate, each reader is likely to hear different echoes and follow different points of connection as they make their way through the drafts. Each reader, too, is likely to choose different poems that strike him or her as of comparable quality to the published works, though critical consensus may emerge. Two prose works—"Writing poetry is an unnatural act" and "Mechanics of pretense: Remarks on W. H. Auden"—included in an appendix, will prove invaluable as guides to Bishop's poetic ideals. Both essays articulate the balance between the natural and the artificial so central to Bishop's

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poetry, or as Bishop put it, "writing poetry is an unnatural act. It takes great skill to make it seem natural" (207). At the end of this essay Bishop writes

> Off and on I have written out a poem called "Grandmother's Glass Eye" which should be about the problem of writing poetry. The situation of my grandmother strikes me as rather like the situation of the poet: the difficulty of combining the real with the decidedly un-real; the natural with the unnatural; the curious effect a poem produces of being as normal as *sight* and yet as synthetic, as artificial, as a *glass eye.* (212)

This is as apt a description of Bishop's poetry as I have come across, and it conveys in the metaphor of the poem as a prosthetic eye something of the "surrealism of everyday life" that Bishop sought to present in her work. Her remarks on Auden are equally insightful. Bishop traces the work of poetry as one of pretense:

> One of the causes of poetry must be, we suppose, the feeling that the contemporary language is not equivalent to the contemporary fact; there is something out of proportion between them, and what is being said in words is not at all what is being said in "things." To connect this disproportion a pretense is at first necessary. By "pretending" the existence of a language appropriate and comparable to the "things" it must deal with, the language is forced into being. (183)

As we absorb a poet's pretense, we begin to filter the world through the language of the poems—"the world actually manages to look like so-and-so's poems" (183)—an effect that Bishop describes as the "tendency . . . of what a poet writes to become *real*" (184).

In its presentation of unfinished work and work in progress, the collection offers us a glimpse of the labor involved in such pretense. Quinn's inclusion of the sixteen drafts of perhaps Bishop's most famous published poem, "One Art," allows the reader to carefully study Bishop's process of composition from beginning to end, a fascinating endeavor and a very useful one for the classroom. "One Art" beautifully demonstrates Bishop's method as one of struggling to find adequate form for feeling—of making legible the attempt to "master . . . disaster"—and many of the drafted poems attest to this process in its earlier, less complete stages. Hence we

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often see moments of uncensored feeling, as in the reference to "our eyes bleary & / slightly tearful" in the early poem "Good-Bye—" (13) (and one wonders whether tears have blurred the writing on the facsimile). The reader learns of Bishop's failed attempt to complete a planned "Aubade and Elegy" for her lover and longtime companion Lota de Macedo Soares, and the painfulness of the attempt is abundantly clear. If "One Art" concludes that mastering disaster is impossible, several of the drafted poems explore in related ways the costs of the attempt at mastery, cautioning us from finding easy consolation or perfection in aesthetic form, or from concluding that the work of grieving can ever be finished. In two fascinating poems, "Keaton" and "Where are the dolls who loved me so," we see the imprint of what Bishop calls in the latter poem a "stoicisim I never mastered" (102), although such stoicism is attempted in the final, perhaps desperate, declaration of Keaton: "I am not sentimental" (120). Keaton invites exploration of issues not only of sentiment but also of gender and sexuality; he comments, "I was made at right angles to the world / and I see it so" (119), echoing other inversions and decenterings of perspective in *The Complete Poems.*

The explicitly erotic poems included here, coupled with poems on the political situation in Brazil, many of which appear to be very finished (and in my opinion equal to any of her published works), suggest that constraints of personal and literary decorum in some cases influenced Bishop's choice of what to publish. The new collection, in other words, asks us to consider the historical and political pressures that shaped the published body of work. Several of these poems—including "Suicide of a Moderate Dictator" and "It's marvelous to wake up together"—have been published previously by Bishop scholars and have already prompted revaluations of Bishop's handling of sexual and political topics. If we see the shape of an enlarged Bishop canon emerge from this collection, then we also see the shadow cast by a book that might have been, "a sequence or collection of poems about Key West" that Bishop tentatively titled *Bone Key* or *Key of Bone* (xiv). Quinn draws these poems from two Key West notebooks dating roughly from 1937 to 1947, and these works are among the strongest and most interesting in the new collection. Barbara Page demonstrates in her study of the Key West notebooks that Bishop's interest in surrealism permeates this work, and the poems collected here evidence in related fashion Bishop's interest in Poe and the gothic. Two unfinished poems about Florida that Bishop wrote later in life—"Something I've

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Meant to Write About for 30 Years" and "Florida Revisited"—indicate the abiding importance of this location to her poetic geography. As Jani Scandura argues, Key West, at the southernmost tip of the US but Caribbean in character, is as important a location for Bishop's interrogation of north and south, nationalism and empire, as Brazil or Nova Scotia, and one hopes that fuller editions of the Key West notebooks will follow. Finally, the collection offers abundant new material for readers interested in studying the themes of travel, tourism, and geogaphy (including Brazil and Nova Scotia); issues of class, race, and gender; and treatments of Bishop's family and childhood.

It's a measure of the richness of Bishop's unfinished work that two of my favorite pieces in the Vassar archive are not collected here. "Gallery Note for Wesley Wehr," a very brief piece that Bishop wrote for her student Wesley Wehr's watercolor exhibition, but which she never used or published, is a beautiful and important meditation on miniatures and her own miniaturist inclinations; according to Brett Millier, Bishop for many years considered it "the finest page of prose she had written" (389). The second essay, "A New Capital, Aldous Huxley, and Some Indians," a 47-page typed travelogue about Bishop's trip to Brasilia, which she hoped to publish in *The New Yorker,* probes the embarrassment generated by seemingly unbridgeable gaps of race, nation, and capital with great precision. So as we welcome the opening up of the Bishop archive to a broader readership through this new collection, let us hope that there are further collections to come.

By way of demonstrating the new vantages and readerly pleasures that this collection offers, I close with a selection from my favorite draft, "One afternoon my aunt and I . . . ," on the surface a description of an afternoon when the young Bishop picked blueberries with her aunt, but in the slippage between berries and babies, becoming a view of that afternoon rendered through her grandmother's glass eye:

> Haycock on haycock in the wagon
> berry on berry in the pail
> Pythagoras
> One more
> berry, one more baby, no more fuss.

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the glaucous berries blind and blue
plop plop almost inaudibly
softly
a cricket held a high hot note
all afternoon (100)

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The Race/Reproduction Bind in Modern Transatlantic Thought

Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought
by Alys Eve Weinbaum
Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. 348 pages

Nicole L. Sparling

Scholars of modernism will no doubt admire Alys Eve Weinbaum's revisionist readings of key players in the modern transatlantic debates over race and reproduction, not to mention her artful recuperation of literary texts that engage critically with those debates. In general, Weinbaum's theoretical approach gestures toward a common trend in both feminist and queer theory that focuses on the intersectionality of identity categories (as opposed to considering them in isolation) when she identifies the "race/reproduction bind" as the organizing "conceptual unit" of the modern episteme (5). The "notion that race can be *reproduced*" forms the underlying assumption of this bind, which leads Weinbaum to the conclusion that "racism and sexism cannot be thought separately precisely because reproduction is a racializing force" (4, 37).

The book begins its dense, richly substantiated narrative of modern thought in the United States. Building on theories of nationalism (such as those proposed by Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, George Mosse, and Anne McClintock) and theories of genealogy (as articulated in the works of Michel Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche), Weinbaum's first chapter uses Kate Chopin's short story "Désirée's Baby" to prove how genealogy may be used "to contest the same biological 'truths' that [it] claim[s] to trace, identify, and sanction" (18). For instance, Weinbaum suggests that while Chopin's story hints at the impossibility of discovering the origins of the genealogical "contamination" that blackens Désirée's baby, it also exposes the logic that holds Désirée solely responsible for the failure to properly reproduce race, since the maternal body was conceived of in contemporaneous thought as *the* vehicle through which "racial property" was passed down (21).

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Weinbaum's second chapter exposes Charlotte Perkins Gilman's overarching eugenic project, which cast women as "the primary agents of racial 'purity,' superiority, and nationalism" (78), in order to critique the unproblematized situation of Gilman as a feminist foremother. In reaction to trends in scholarly approaches to Gilman that either conclude that her political beliefs about race are secondary to her feminist politics or marginalize her theoretical essays in favor of her literary texts, Weinbaum warns against privileging a feminist genealogy that fails to recognize its own complicity with colonial, racist, and imperialist projects (87). She continues the project of "mak[ing] feminism more historically minded" (117) in the next chapter by reexamining the role that race plays in Engels's *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State,* thus questioning unselfconscious feminist appeals to Marxism. Here Weinbaum demonstrates how Marx and Engels take the matriarchal society of the Iroquois as a representative example of all primitive peoples, an assumption that forms the basis of their theories. As she elucidates, "the overturning of matriarchal kinship systems that results in women's subordination is [made] tantamount to the subordination of Western civilization's other, principally the Iroquois" (125), which provides further justification for the argument that feminists cannot posit racism and sexism as independent ideologies or practices.

Building on her observation that women have become the medium through which race is reproduced, chapter 4 highlights the means by which "wayward female desire" becomes an object of scientific scrutiny and a matter of increasing social exigency. In this chapter Weinbaum juxtaposes Darwin's *Sexual Selection* with Freud's essay "The Aetiology of Hysteria" to demonstrate how "racialization is intimately bound up with women's sexual agency and wayward desire" (171). In the case of Darwin, female desire is positioned as central to the process of sexual selection, and therefore women's choice of partner directly determines the racial health of the nation. On the other hand, through his deracialization of his hysterical patient Bertha Pappenheim (to whom he gives the pseudonym Anna O.), Freud pathologizes and universalizes incest as the cause of hysteria. According to Weinbaum,

> incest, far from being regarded as a "universal" experience, was within the scientific and medical literature of the period invariably cast as a Jewish racial trait characteristic of a people who were thought to be mired in tribal exclusiveness. (165)

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Scholars of Freud and modernism will appreciate Weinbaum's astute attention to language in this chapter, as she reveals the racial etymology of the term *jargon,* which was used to describe Anna O.'s language in her hysterical state as associated with "Jewish talk" or Yiddish. Based on this clarification, Weinbaum traces Anna O.'s cure in racial terms, as she "progresses" from talking "jargon" to speaking proper German (181).

In the last chapter we return to the other side of the Atlantic, where the writings of W. E. B. Dubois construct, for Weinbaum, the possibility for a "genealogical counternarrative" in "refusing to construct the maternal body as the source of racial identity" (197). Here Weinbaum finds in W. E. B. Dubois's novels a reformulation of the mother-child relationship as primarily based on spiritual connection and a passing down of traditions, a "universalizable cultural inheritance" rather than a strictly biological connection (195, 199). As such, W. E. B. Dubois posits the existence of a "black All-Mother" in his conception of what Weinbaum designates as "racial globality": "a form of international kinship that encompasses all the darker peoples of the world, and constitutes a refutation of U.S. racial nationalism" (208). However, in response to more recent calls to move beyond race as a result of the human genome project, Weinbaum's coda demonstrates how "new genomic technologies and biotechnologies [are used] not so much to transcend race as to reproduce already existent racial identities and hierarchies" (230). She reminds us that technology is never neutral and that "race and reproduction remain tightly bound, even as race loses its status as biological essence, and reproduction assumes previously unimagined forms" (231, 242).

Weinbaum's book possesses an internal logic insofar as she traces the progression from local to global articulations of the complex "race/reproduction bind." Still, the reader is left with questions about the transatlantic aspects and formal implications of her study. How are we, for example, to understand the specific subjects of her study in dialogue or conversation with one another, beyond the boundaries of the chapters? Also, why is her decision to focus on literary texts in the United States and theoretical texts in the European context left unexplored, as are differences of genre? Regardless of these unanswered questions, however, the exigency for Weinbaum's text is undeniably present throughout her analysis. The epigraph to the final chapter excerpted from Donna Haraway summarizes the urgency of Weinbaum's project well:

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> Ties through blood—including blood recast in the coin of genes and information—have been bloody enough already. I believe that there will be no racial or sexual peace, no livable nature, until we learn to produce humanity through something more and less than kinship. (227)

Moreover, as Weinbaum demonstrates, it is women who suffer the material effects of this discourse, as both female bodies and female desires are co-opted for the sake of maintaining racial/national genealogies. As such, she reminds us of the subversive and transformative potential of wayward reproductions.

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American Modernist Literary Imagination and is at work on a study of Delmore Schwartz and the legibility of Jewishness in twentieth-century America. <bjs44@psu.edu>

Chad Trevitte is visiting assistant professor of English at Wake Forest University. His scholarly work focuses on American modernism, with special emphasis on American fiction during the decade following World War I. His publications include an essay on Sherwood Anderson's "The Book of the Grotesque" forthcoming in *Genre,* and he has delivered conference presentations on the work of Willa Cather, Henry Adams, and Thomas Pynchon. His essay on Cather's *A Lost Lady* has been adapted from a longer book project exploring the relevance of Theodor Adorno's aesthetic theory to postwar American modernism.

Submissions

Twentieth-Century Literature welcomes the submission of new scholarly essays on any aspect of literature written in the twentieth century. Essays should be prepared in accordance with the *MLA Style Manual,* 2nd ed. Send your essay as an e-mail attachment to Keith.M.Dallas@Hofstra.edu. Or mail three hard copies to Twentieth-Century Literature, 107 Hofstra University, Hempstead NY 11549-1070. Include a self-addressed, stamped envelope for return.

Twentieth-Century Literature also invites reviews of recent books of scholarship and criticism focusing on twentieth-century literature. Reviews should be 5–12 typed pages, MLA style. Please query one of the coeditors before submission: James Berger <engjab@hofstra.edu> or Anita Patterson <apatters@bu.edu>.

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Twentieth-Century Literature's Andrew J. Kappel Prize in Literary Criticism, 2007

The winner of this year's prize is Jonathan Greenberg's "Why Can't Biologists Read Poetry? Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love.*" The judge is Hortense J. Spillers, Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt Chair in English at Vanderbilt University. Professor Spillers's recent work has appeared in *New Centennial Review, boundary 2,* and German and Japanese journals, and she is working on a manuscript titled "The Idea of Black Culture," to be published by Blackwell's.

Professor Spillers writes:

> I cannot think of a more daunting task in the powers of discernment that I have been called on to exercise lately than trying to select the winner of the 2007 Andrew J. Kappel Prize for *Twentieth-Century Literature.* Actually, the assignment has provoked a good deal of humility and enough anxiety of judgment in me to last awhile, except to say that I *am* sure that a case could be made for any of the nominees. The proof of the latter is that I have changed my mind at least once. That's how good they were! But "Why Can't Biologists Read Poetry? Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*" homes right in on my own literary critic's readerly resistance with virtually shocking, laser-like precision. To cite one of the closing lines of the argument, literary critics can't read science (nor do they always want to) when, like the heroine of McEwan's *Enduring Love,* "they attend solely to an instinctual or emotional register and dismiss reflexively the legitimacy of science and reason," while the scientists are unable to read poetry when "they become triumphant rationalists, refusing to acknowledge the origins of their ideas in their interests—economic, psychological, or corporeal." I began my reading of this essay with a child's attitude toward eating her vegetables, or in consonance with the primary figurative path of the essay, not very interested in a "happy marriage" between literature and science, but ended up all aglow, to my considerable surprise, with the hope "for a rapprochement between the disciplines." The essay walked me—almost literally—from dismissive reflexion to submis-

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sive meditation in the course of a couple of dreary late-fall afternoons. In that regard, reading the essay was itself a kind of living demonstration of the very argument that it was making, as I was delighted to misrecall in the process that one of the subliminal "heroes" in the interstices of the piece—William Wordsworth—notes in the Preface to the 2nd edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* not exactly what I remember, but close enough in intimating that no perdurable chasm opens between poetry and science, if "poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge," as well as "the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science." Well over a century and a half later, this felicitous collision is still news.

For the reasons that I have delineated, then, I have chosen "Why Can't Biologists Read Poetry?" for this year's Kappel Prize. No small part of my immense pleasure in reading this writing rests in the clarity of its prose and the eloquent persuasive force of its arguments. The evidence is steadily marshalled across varying conceptual terrains—from narrative theory, textual explication, and "close reading" to neo-Darwinist theory in the context of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology as well as aspects of philosophical and psychoanalytical debate. Rendered harmonious by what I would call an interpretive tour de force, these differing and dissonant discourses are aimed at offering "less a Darwinian reading of culture than a cultural reading of Darwinism" on the disciplinary basis of the humanities, especially literary criticism. The essay serves, then, as a staging ground of inquiry "into both the new Darwinism *and* the resistance to it" as it poses both the central question that drives it, "Why *can't* biologists read poetry?" and its twin—"Why can't poets (or literary critics, or humanists) read science?" The investigation strikes me as especially timely, given the fashion of the new scientific persuasions as well as the grave *political* ramifications of neo-Darwinist ideologies, reflected in US policy both foreign and domestic. In short, if this essay does not concern itself with the broader power questions that trouble our national sleep, it does—to put the matter far too crudely—suggest to my mind that the "matter with Kansas," say, might find at least partial explanation in the formidable darkness of our collective and individual fantasies and the latter's connection to erotomania. But that gets too far ahead of the story; what is fascinating to my mind is how this essay, perhaps

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without meaning to, waltzes me around to a consideration of my own values and interests at some apparent remove from the arguments that evoked them.

From the top, then. The writer chooses not only a novel to address the problematic at hand but also what appears to be the *perfect* novel for doing so, because *Enduring Love* brings together a female literary critic (Clarissa Mellon) and a male writer of scientific journalism (Joe Rose) in a common-law marriage "going South" because of their conflicting worldviews; in another sense, we might say that *Enduring Love* was rather self-selective to the extent that Ian McEwan himself engages in the novel "contemporary debates about neo-Darwinism by representing a series of interrelated conflicts between scientific, literary, and religious world views." The novel draws out the antagonisms that emerge in the couple in a complex way, inasmuch as it seeks to imagine "human beings with conflicting temperaments and beliefs placed in situations of crisis." Given McEwan's provocation, the writer sets out to do three things in three discrete, yet interrelated, sections of the essay: (1) to show how the novel inscribes an "implicit critique of the narrator's excessive rationalism," (2) to explore how journalist/narrator Joe's beliefs are animated by economic interests and "how neo-Darwinism itself is represented as a phenomenon of the publishing market as much as of science," and finally (3) to look into the "problem of self-deception," as the novel articulates it, which generates productive parallelisms with "the narrative problem of unreliability," which, in turn, takes the reader back to Darwinian theory, refracted through a Nietzschean lens! As if the foregoing were not enough, we also hear in the writer's review of Nietzsche's "idiosyncratic reading" of Darwin's theory on the bodily origins of the "will to disinterested knowledge" a not-so-distant echo of the Freudian theory of thinking, which processes, according to the good doctor, actually trace back to the infant's pangs of hunger.

To pick up on a beautifully placed figurative and literary allusion buried in the folds of the essay, I would point out that each of the three sections constitutes one after another "turn of the screw" that bolts the attention down on the essay's critical moves toward a masterfully prepared and ineluctable conclusion: if we are to avoid a "rationalism gone beserk " *and* a squishy overdrive in the emotional

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gear, then we will seek a "happy marriage" somewhere between the *failure* of both postures. The essay's conclusions mimic the conciliatory gestures of the novel's ending, but in order to reach either we are compelled to negotiate our way through many of the transformations in literary/critical/theoretical practice that have occurred over the last three decades—the emergence of the "implied author" and the "writing writer"; the differences in positioning between "the narrating" and "the narrated," which, in the case of *Enduring Love*, are subtleties of placement that converge on Joe Rose, the first-person narrator; the retrieval of "failure" as an acknowledgable, indeed victorious (and postmodern), outcome; the upending of the certainty of closure by turning back the *partiality* of any statement on the declarative itself, which critical mode tends toward an infinite regress (even as the argument goes ahead) in the direction of indeterminacy and undecidability; the centifugal generosity of narrative theory and literary criticism in drawing other disciplines onto its capacious ground; and a significant foray into the literary functions of psychoanalytic theory, especially its Lacanian marque, as advanced in the work of Slavoj Žižek.

One of the essay's more difficult turns of the screw involves a complication in the plot line of the novel itself: joining Joe in an attempt to rescue a child during a ballooning accident is Jed Parry, a character described as a "Christian homosexual," suffering from a mental illness known as "de Clérambault's syndrome," which distinguished etiology was provided by Jacques Lacan's mentor Gaetan de Clérambault. It happens that Parry is a madman who has fallen in love with Joe and proceeds to harass (with love letters) and stalk him; Joe consequently falls into a state of paranoia and finally solicits the interpretive skills of his lover Clarissa (critic and Keats scholar in search of Keats's "lost" love letters to Fannie Brawne) to help decipher the hermeneutic design of the scattered pieces of empirical data coming in from crazy Jed. Joe the rationalist and Jed the Christian merge as doubles, insofar as Lacanian-style paranoia and de Clérambault's syndrome share a diagnostic field. As the essayist puts it: "Both the rational scientist and the insane religious man equally become prisoners in their own symbolic constructions." In an ultimate twist of reading, Joe's fantasies have fructified in Parry's embodiment; at least as far as Clarissa can guess, Parry is

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the "'kind of phantom that only [Joe] could have called up, a spirit of [his] dislocated, incomplete character,'" which derives joy, as a manifest instance, in separating ideas from people and interests. As one of the critics that the essayist calls on would have it, Parry is an image of "the neurosis implicit in Joe's own consciousness."

After multiple twists and turns in the road, McEwan's pair is reconciled, as the adoption of a child seals the deal. Meanwhile, the essayist's metareader, positioned at an Archimedean point (or close enough) outside the novel and, for the time being, "outside" the polemical poles that have brought the fiction to stand, marvels at the intermediary, interdisciplinary path that the essayist charts with compass-like accuracy and reflection.

The Andrew J. Kappel Prize in Literary Criticism, named for the late critic and esteemed deputy editor of *Twentieth-Century Literature,* is awarded annually to the author (or authors) of a work submitted to the journal during the preceding year that is judged to make the most impressive contribution to our understanding and appreciation of the literature of the twentieth century. Nominees are chosen by the editor of *Twentieth-Century Literature* and members of the editorial board. A different prominent literary critic serves each year as judge. The prize includes publication in our Summer issue and an award of $500. All essays submitted to the journal are eligible, except those for special issues.

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Why Can't Biologists Read Poetry?
Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*

Jonathan Greenberg

Since the reinvention of social Darwinism as sociobiology in the 1970s, and particularly since the reinvention of sociobiology as evolutionary psychology in the 1990s, the deployment of Darwinian ideas and models has been steadily on the rise in a wide variety of academic fields—Brian Boyd offers a list that includes ethology, linguistics, artificial intelligence, neurophysiology, anthropology, analytic philosophy, and psychology (2).[1] Yet literary study has been curiously reticent in engaging this intellectual trend. A recent review of the prominent journal of theory *Critical Inquiry* reveals that while Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud vie for position with Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault among the journal's most frequently footnoted thinkers, Darwin is, apparently, nowhere to be found (Stevens and Williams 217). To be sure, a small and determined group of scholars has attempted to ground the study of literature in evolutionary psychology, and others have investigated Darwin's impact on, and debts to, the literature and culture of his own era.[2] But literary criticism—in part because of its investments in historicizing and relativizing cultural norms, in part because of a healthy suspicion of the ways in which Darwin's name has been used to justify reactionary views on race, class, and gender—remains wary of the neo-Darwinian vogue, with its axiom, taken from entomologist Edward O. Wilson, that "the genes hold culture on a leash" (167).

Barbara Herrnstein Smith's recent discussions of human-animal relations, for example, are so trenchant in their attacks on the neo-Darwinist linguist Steven Pinker—for his reckless application of metaphors from the human realm to the animal, for his apparent disdain for literature and the arts—that her reader might fail to notice that she is, in fact, arguing

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for the recognition of neo-Darwinian insights about the permeability of the human-animal divide. Similarly, although Marjorie Garber challenges neo-Darwinists, most notably her Harvard colleague Wilson, for their reduction of human nature to "the level of the gene" (21), she does not dispute Wilson's arguments so much as simply dislike them. Rebuking Wilson for his relegation of the literary to a purely ornamental or decorative function, she points out that he quotes Iago's endorsement of "good name" as evidence for the evolutionary hazards of sexual infidelity but utterly neglects "Iago's position as the most arrant hypocrite in all of Shakespeare, [and] his own contempt for 'good name' as compared to more material and vengeful rewards" (28). It may be accidental that a question of sexual jealousy underlies the example over which Wilson and Garber skirmish, but Garber's response to Wilson, and Smith's to Pinker, partake, I suggest, of a slightly different sort of jealousy, a possessiveness about the realm of the literary.

Thus in asking why biologists can't read poetry, I want to address both senses of the question—I want to ask not only why masterly scientists like Wilson prove to be clumsy and undergraduate-sounding when they talk about Shakespeare but also why literary critics like Garber and Smith (and myself) *want* them to be bad readers. Why *can't* biologists read poetry? At the same time, however, I pose the converse question: Why can't poets (or literary critics, or humanists) read science? What cultural strictures or habits of thought make us regard the invocation of Darwin's name—especially when it comes to explanations of culture—with suspicion? In answering these questions I do not propose to stake out a position on exactly how far Darwinian thinking can usefully be extended to the social sciences and humanities. My inquiry into both the new Darwinism and the resistance to it will remain largely within my own disciplinary territory—literary criticism. In short, I aim to offer less a Darwinian reading of culture than a cultural reading of Darwinism.

This reading will proceed through a detailed analysis of Ian McEwan's novel *Enduring Love*—a novel that engages contemporary debates about neo-Darwinism by representing a series of interrelated conflicts between scientific, literary, and religious worldviews. The novel seeks not to pronounce authoritatively on the validity of neo-Darwinism but—as novels tend to do—to imagine human beings with conflicting temperaments and beliefs placed in situations of crisis. Through these crises, the novel investigates and tests the legitimacy of the characters' different worldviews.[3] The

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major themes of the novel are, moreover, important Darwinian themes, and thus what may initially look like mere disciplinary disputes between the "two cultures" play out in a range of surprising ways—as conflicts about sexual fidelity, childbearing, self-deception, and the power of narrative.[4]

I maintain that the narrator's neo-Darwinist beliefs are taken quite seriously by the novel, and there is good reason to find in the novel an implicit endorsement of neo-Darwinism by the author himself.[5] However, these neo-Darwinist beliefs, even if held by McEwan the thinker, are complicated and at times even subverted in various ways by McEwan the novelist. In section 1 of this essay I aim to show how *Enduring Love* presents ideas and people, minds and bodies, values and facts as thoroughly bound up with one another and thus forces us to see the beliefs of the novel's characters in the context of their interests. In section 2 I develop this point in three ways: (1) by showing how the novel offers an implicit critique of the narrator's excessive rationalism, which divorces ideas from people; (2) by exploring how the narrator's beliefs are motivated by economic forces (among other interests), and how neo-Darwinism itself is represented as a phenomenon of the publishing market as much as of science; and (3) by examining the novel's attention to the problem of self-deception, which has parallels to the narrative problem of unreliability, and which reminds the reader that Darwin's own theory, seen here through Nietzsche's idiosyncratic reading of it, asserts the bodily origin of what appears as—but never fully attains the status of—the will to disinterested knowledge. Finally, in section 3, I turn to the novel's foregrounding of its own narrative structures and strategies and its implication that narrative and interpretation are inescapable. Both the novel's neo-Darwinian narrator and his primary antagonist, an anti-Darwinian religious stalker, become prisoners of their own narrative constructions and thus illustrate Jacques Lacan's insight that in paranoia narrative or fantasy acquires the capacity to structure facts. Here the critique of neo-Darwinism emerges once again, if more subtly; the novel's illustration of the ways in which rational faculties can be controlled and directed by fantastic desires serves to undercut the triumphalist aspirations of the neo-Darwinist worldview. In concluding, I argue that, despite its multifaceted critique of neo-Darwinism, *Enduring Love* does in fact hold out hope for a rapprochement between the sciences and the humanities.

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The infant's smile

Enduring Love presents a troubled marriage of science and literature: Joe Rose, the narrator and a science journalist, is married—by common law only—to Clarissa Mellon, a Keats scholar.[6] Joe and Clarissa represent, fairly schematically, not only opposing disciplines but also opposing worldviews, even opposing principles: science and literature, reason and emotion, nature and culture. More specifically, they represent opposing attitudes toward Darwin, or at least toward the applicability of Darwin's thought to questions of human behavior and values. Joe has taken up the hobbyhorse of evolutionary psychology and sees the world through the eyes of a sociobiologist, offering Darwinian genealogies for phenomena as diverse as religious belief, amnesia, and the tonal intervals of names called out at Heathrow Airport. Clarissa, in contrast, has "taken against the whole project" (74) of neo-Darwinism, which she regards as "rationalism gone berserk," a "new fundamentalism" that offers "a reason for everything" (75). By staging a debate between Joe and Clarissa over neo-Darwinism, McEwan inserts in the novel, quite seamlessly, a kind of philosophical dialogue, a dialogue in which he can articulate two sides of a Darwinist/humanist debate without overtly championing either. What seems beyond debate for McEwan, however, is that there is a conflict: science and literature are antagonists, and Darwinism somehow threatens the values of the literary critic.

The details of this debate merit attention. An argument between Joe and Clarissa erupts when Joe invokes a neo-Darwinist explanation for an infant's smile:

> The word from the human biologists bears Darwin out: the way we wear our emotions on our faces is pretty much the same in all cultures, and the infant smile is one social signal that is particularly easy to isolate and study. [. . .] In Edward O. Wilson's cool phrase, it "triggers a more abundant share of parental love and affection." (74)

Not surprisingly, Clarissa the poetry scholar finds such thinking reductive:

> Everything was being stripped down, she said, and in the process some larger meaning was lost. What a zoologist had to say about a baby's smile could be of no real interest. The truth of that smile

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> was in the eye and heart of the parent, and in the unfolding love that only had meaning through time. (75)

Joe in turn dismisses Clarissa's position as a consequence of reading too much Keats, whom he calls "an obscurantist" (75) for fearing the rise of science—a fear most famously articulated in lines near the end of "Lamia": "Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings, / Conquer all mysteries by rule and line, / Empty the haunted air, and gnoméd mine— / Unweave a rainbow" (924).[7] Contra Keats, Joe asserts that philosophy does not and cannot unweave the rainbow:

> If we value a baby's smile, why not contemplate its source? Are we to say that all infants enjoy a secret joke? Or that God reaches down and tickles them? Or, least implausibly, that they learn smiling from their mothers? But, then, deaf-and-blind babies smile too. That smile must be hard-wired and for good evolutionary reasons. (75)

Yet Clarissa is not interested in the evolutionary argument: "Clarissa said I still did not understand her, she was talking about love" (75). Like Barbara Herrnstein Smith and Marjorie Garber, Clarissa argues not against the logic of Darwinism but against something more vague: the very way of seeing the world that makes such an explanation satisfactory. Neo-Darwinian discourse appears to make no room for a value—whether it is sensitivity to metaphor as it is for Smith, appreciation of literary irony as it is for Garber, or, in this case, simply love—that the humanist holds dear.[8]

McEwan, it could be claimed, thus only succeeds in evading the central challenge of neo-Darwinism because he articulates objections to it without engaging it on its own scientific terms. By dramatizing the debate over Edward O. Wilson as a lovers' quarrel, he avoids choosing sides and instead merely gives voice to the different positions involved. Yet fiction of necessity claims the liberty to engage with ideas in a more open, fluid, and imaginative way than does philosophy. The questions that the Darwinist/humanist debate raises may prove more interesting to the novelist than any answer he could provide, and the hypothetical may offer more to a literary imagination than the actual. (McEwan's own comments lend some support to this stance: "I wrote the book in a spirit of investigation, rather than try to give a lot of answers to either how people should live

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or whether one could live a good life by scientific method" [Interview].) In fact, it is precisely because McEwan has created novelistic characters rather than the mere mouthpieces of a philosophical dialogue that his engagement with neo-Darwinism is distinguished from the kind of popular science journalism that Joe Rose writes. By setting particularized characters within a narrative framework, McEwan is able to suggest the necessary connection between the characters' intellectual positions and their emotional investments, to demonstrate that the philosophical clash matters primarily as a symptom of deeper temperamental or intrapsychic conflicts.

Whatever his commitment to neo-Darwinism, then, McEwan never loses sight of the fact that Joe and Clarissa are, within the fictional world of *Enduring Love,* not only people but also lovers, and that any disagreement between them will carry significant emotional freight. Most obviously, Clarissa's insistence that the "truth" of the infant's smile can only be found in a love that "unfold[s]" over a period of time suggests her belief in the existence of the "enduring love" of the novel's title. Somewhat less obviously, her insistence also implicitly questions whether Joe shares this belief, and thus hints at a fundamental instability in their marriage. Clarissa's scholarly quest for some hypothetical last letters which she conjectures Keats to have written but never sent to Fanny Brawne similarly indicates such an underlying conflict. She believes these "lost" letters might articulate in a last burst of eloquence the doomed poet's enduring love, what Joe calls "a cry of undying love not touched by despair" (238); Joe suspects that his wife's fascination with the letters "ha[s] something to do with our own situation, and with her conviction that love that did not find its expression in a letter was not perfect" (7)—and thus with his own inability to express his love to her in a letter. Hence the significance of Joe's irrational ad hominem attack on the long-dead Keats and his attribution of Clarissa's anti-Darwinist position to her immersion in her literary studies, which suggest a covert resentment of Clarissa's work. Joe has joked about Clarissa's obsession with Keats, describing her as "in love with another man" (8), but his levity cannot quite conceal a sexual jealousy latent in the relationship—a jealousy provoked by the ghostly Keats. Hence also Joe's birthday gift to Clarissa, late in the novel, of a rare edition of Keats's poetry; Joe in this instance enlists Keats to articulate what he himself cannot. The value of the literary in this novel then seems to be that it offers access to love. If Joe, who knows "little about Keats or

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his poetry" (7), seems jealous of Keats, or desirous of his help, it is because the poet, even speaking from beyond the grave, can do what the scientist cannot. The poet can do more than merely describe love: he can enact it, call it into being. Joe is jealous, one might say, of literature itself.

The fact that the philosophical differences between Joe and Clarissa betray deeper emotional struggles between them is not lost on Joe. Joe the narrator, who is sometimes more perspicacious than Joe the character, identifies a personal conflict underlying the whole debate about the infant's smile: "We had had this conversation in different forms on many occasions. What we were really talking about this time was the absence of babies from our lives" (75). Joe's casual insertion of "really" betrays a hermeneutic approach to human motivation that is subtly psychoanalytic, or at any rate less mechanistic, than the often formulaic evolutionary psychology that the reader has gotten used to hearing from him.[9] He recognizes that his and Clarissa's philosophical positions might result less from logic than from unspoken, even unconscious, motives. And to be sure, the desire for children does prove a crucial subtext in the novel, as befits a book so preoccupied with Darwinian imperatives. For the novel intimates that the inability of Joe and Clarissa to reproduce poses a threat to the endurance of their love. Such a view would conform to a fairly widespread neo-Darwinist view of marriage and heterosexual love, a view that sees monogamy primarily as a mechanism for ensuring the paternal care of offspring. The journalist Robert Wright, for example, offers this description of love: "The genetic payoff of having two parents devoted to a child's welfare is the reason men and women can fall into swoons over one another, including swoons of great duration" (59). That McEwan, who cites Wright's book in his acknowledgments, should echo the last word of this description in his own title may be coincidental, but it suggests that the novelist shares the journalist's conviction about the importance of the questions raised by a Darwinian account of love.

Children after all play a crucial role in the novel. At the outset, Clarissa appears to have comfortably adapted to the lack of children of her own with an almost saintly generosity toward "[n]ephews, nieces, godchildren, the children of neighbors and old friends" (34). But the death of a man named John Logan in the effort to save a child's life has (Joe believes) awakened feelings of loss in Clarissa for the children she has been unable to conceive, as she sees in Logan "a man prepared to die to prevent the kind of loss she felt herself to have sustained" (35). Logan's own children

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function in the story as surrogate offspring for Joe: his first encounter with them reminds him of the value of his and Clarissa's mutual but endangered love, and they reappear in the final chapter of his narrative as wide-eyed disciples dazzled by the wonder of science that Joe shares with them.[10] Indeed this final encounter not only suggests that science might help one appreciate the aesthetic (rather than destroying it) but also hints that Joe is overcoming the "uneasiness" (127) he confesses to feeling in the presence of children. The final chapter, in other words, discloses, albeit hesitantly, an increased desire on Joe's part to become a father. (The reader learns of the fulfillment of this desire, significantly, only through the novel's first appendix—a point to which I will return.) In sum, the subtext of the Darwin debate between Joe and Clarissa proves to be the unanswered question of whether their love, like Keats's for Fanny Brawne, can endure without the immediate Darwinian motive of shared offspring who perpetuate a genetic line. (Keats died childless.) The debate over neo-Darwinism may mask a deeper and more particular interpersonal conflict, but that conflict in turn hinges on questions of love, sex, and procreation central to neo-Darwinist theory.

Rationalism gone berserk

To review: in *Enduring Love* the reader's effort to evaluate the theoretical claims of evolutionary psychology is complicated, even frustrated, by a novelistic form in which philosophical positions appear as symptoms of underlying emotional conflicts—emotional conflicts that, moreover, themselves are founded on questions essential to neo-Darwinism. George Levine claims that "[f]eeling and valuing are never far from objective and disinterested science, and feeling and valuing are inevitably tied closely to the culture in which the scientist, willy nilly, is immersed" (*Darwin Loves You* 169). If for "culture" we can comfortably substitute "character" or "psychology," then *Enduring Love* seems to endorse this view. But such an endorsement is not a statement that neo-Darwinist claims are null and void; putatively disinterested views may be tied to feeling and valuing, but the novel itself suggests that such feelings and values originate in the same basic motives for survival and reproduction on which Darwin and his sociobiological successors put such great emphasis.

If this recursivity were not enough trouble for a reader, McEwan further complicates the reader's task by undermining his narrator's reliability

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and his character's lucidity.[11] *Enduring Love* is saturated with the voice, character, and worldview of its narrator, Joe. In its very style it displays his meticulous memory for and attention to detail, his cool and often fastidious regulation of emotion, and (as noted) his careful interpolations of scientific explanations for narrative events. The result is a picture of events, but also a picture of Joe.[12] Initially, the narrative voice performs this characterizing function without undermining the reader's basic trust in the narrator; the novel's much-discussed and brilliantly rendered initial catastrophe provides a perfect opportunity to display how Joe's neo-Darwinist worldview not only presents and evaluates events but also characterizes Joe himself. An attempt to rescue a man and a child during a ballooning accident poses a stark moral question—when do you risk your life in the hope of saving another's?—and Joe's evolutionary psychology neatly frames the conflict between obligation to oneself and obligation to another. Yet at the same time his Darwinian perspective allows him to disburden the problem of its moral freight and restore to it some of the "comforting geometry" that belongs to "the knowable, limited plane of the snooker table" (3). Rather than try to assess moral credit or blame for the failure of the rescue (in which John Logan dies), Joe presents morality as a mere phenotypic manifestation of an evolved genetic program, "a deeper covenant, ancient and automatic, written in our nature" (15). In his account, all the would-be rescuers, faced with a crisis, are thrown back on a premoral instinct—or more precisely, a clash of instincts, between "cooperation," which Joe describes as "the basis of our earliest hunting successes, the force behind our evolving capacity for language" (15), and "selfishness," which "is also written on our hearts" (15) and which constitutes the most fundamental of Darwinian motives, survival.

Thus, although Clarissa insists on characterizing Logan as a "good man" (34), Joe tends to see his sacrifice as merely the consequence of an eccentricity in genetic coding; Logan is a man "in whom the flame of altruism must have burned a little stronger" (16). In Joe's neo-Darwinist view, morality in any sense other than self-interest seems to disappear altogether: "Mostly, we are good when it makes sense" (15)—a claim that echoes Michael Ruse and Edward O. Wilson: "Morality, or more strictly our belief in morality, is merely an adaptation put in place to further our reproductive ends" (510). Thus while Joe acknowledges the "horrified shame" (16) and "the nausea of guilt" (35) that he felt after Logan's death, his account, in its clinical precision, leaves little room for examination

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of such feelings. Joe's Darwinism, which reduces human motives to an unconscious and biological calculus among inborn instincts, appears as avoidance or displacement of the emotional horror of Logan's death. At this point, whether or not one considers Joe fully unreliable as a narrator, we see that he—both in the past as a character and in the present as a narrator—tends to divorce ideas from people, to theorize what Levine calls a "split between the intellectual and the affective" (*Darwin Loves You* 34). Yet this split is precisely what *Enduring Love,* as a work of imaginative fiction and psychological realism, will not—indeed cannot—posit, its very mode being to situate its intellectual conflicts within psychological contexts.

If such extreme scientism initially makes a reader suspicious of Joe's judgments, it is only as the novel progresses that Joe displays the quality by which Clarissa describes the discourse of evolutionary psychology itself: "rationalism gone berserk" (74). As the crises in Joe's life mount—he is convinced that one of the other rescuers, a Christian homosexual named Jed Parry, is stalking him, and that Parry suffers from a mental illness called de Clérambault's syndrome—he appears, both to those in the text and those reading it, increasingly irrational. For example, when frustrated by the inadequate science collection in the London Library, Joe thinks:

> The science collection here was laughable. The assumption appeared to be that the world could be sufficiently understood through fictions, histories, and biographies. Did the scientific illiterates who ran this place, and who dared call themselves educated people, really believe that literature was the greatest intellectual achievement of our civilization? (45–46)

Joe, despite his occasional allusions to Wagner, Meredith, and Chesterton, here reveals himself as the philistine that the literary critic might secretly believe all scientists to be; his little learning, like Edward O. Wilson's quotation from *Othello,* is purely ornamental. If, following Wayne Booth, we understand unreliability as a narrator's divergence from the "norms of the work" or "the implied author's norms" (158), then this passage might seem to be a smoking gun, clear evidence that McEwan (the "implied" McEwan) is critical of Joe's worldview. Novelists who don't have much regard for literature are rare, and the reader of this passage is likely to assume that Joe's judgment on the value of literature is at odds with that of his creator. As Timothy Bewes remarks: "This, after all, is an imagina-

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tive work of fiction; the text therefore colludes with Clarissa, the literary scholar, over Joe *from the outset*" (431; Bewes's italics). And once Joe has taken such a dubious position on the value of literature, the reader will naturally suspect his other judgments as well.

Joe's authority is further undermined by the presence of other characters' voices, in particular a letter from Parry. Although most readers, even the religiously or mystically inclined, will regard Parry's professions of his love for Joe and unquestioning faith in a benign and loving God as at worst lunatic and at best naïve, his words at times still touch a chord.[13] He comments incisively on Joe's professional work, which, he claims, never doubts itself for a moment:

> You're there with up-to-the-minute truth on bacteria and particles and agriculture and Saturn's rings and musical harmony and risk theory and bird migration. [. . .] It's all shopping. You buy it all, you're a cheerleader for it, an ad man hired to talk up other people's stuff. In four years of journalism, not a word about the real things, like love and faith. (147)

Parry's critique of Joe echoes Clarissa's earlier comments about Joe's failure to understand love, but it also points out the degree to which Joe's journalism is driven less by a scientific pursuit of truth than by what Joe elsewhere calls a "standard [of] readability" (54)—that is, the imperatives of the publishing market.

Representing Joe as nothing more than a middleman who "shop[s]" for "other people's" trendy ideas, "talk[s] [them] up," and then sells them to the consumer at a profit, Parry indicts not only Joe's belief in science but more specifically his career as a journalistic popularizer. As McEwan himself has noted, the genre of science writing in which Joe makes his living has become significant in the contemporary publishing market.[14] The volumes cited in McEwan's acknowledgments include texts by Edward O. Wilson, Steven Pinker, Antonio Damasio, Robert Wright, and Walter Bodmer and Robert McKie—all written for an audience of nonspecialists, many of them in a frenzy of publishing surrounding the much-hyped human genome project. Joe's narrative in fact often reads like McEwan's pitch-perfect imitation of the confident, pedantic tone that such books tend to adopt. Parry's critique, furthermore, finds validation in Joe's own account of his work:

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> A few years ago, science book editors could think of nothing but chaos. Now they were banging their desks for every possible slant on Neo-Darwinism, evolutionary psychology, and genetics. I wasn't complaining—business was good. (74)

Even as he bemoans his academic failure, Joe concedes, "I've made a lot of money swinging spider-monkey-style on the tallest trees of the science fashion jungle" (80). Joe is, as Bewes notes, "himself already a commodified form of rationalism in its pure state" (431), a professional who turns ideas into best sellers. Parry's critique of Joe's neo-Darwinism, then, overlaps with the implicit critique rendered through the narrative voice; by exploring how the narrator's beliefs are motivated by economic forces and how neo-Darwinism itself is represented as a phenomenon as much of the publishing market as of science, McEwan once again contextualizes the abstract debate—here less in a psychological context than in an economic one, though the two are not in this case easily separated.

Joe not only derives immediate financial benefit from marketing neo-Darwinist ideas, he also derives an important secondary benefit: like the primary readership of this genre, and like McEwan himself, Joe Rose is a wealthy white man—a member of precisely that group which has the most to gain (or preserve) by the neo-Darwinist tendency to ratify existing social advantages as "natural." As Louis Menand has written in a critique of neo-Darwinism, "the sciences of human nature tend to validate the practices and preferences of whatever regime happens to be sponsoring them" (96). Menand continues: "In totalitarian regimes, dissidence is treated as a mental illness. In apartheid regimes, interracial contact is treated as unnatural. In free-market regimes, self-interest is treated as hardwired."[15] Such a critique, it should be emphasized, does not reject scientific knowledge but rather calls attention to the potential for biases and blindnesses that render it less disinterested than it purports to be. Our sciences can (and do) serve our own interests, Menand suggests, and he notes that while the biases of scientific discourse may be obvious when we consider a foreign sociopolitical milieu—the Soviet Union, apartheid-era South Africa—they are likely to be less obvious when we regard a contemporary Western democracy.

But to give the screw one more turn, this very obliviousness to the ways in which our beliefs are entangled with our interests is, ironically, a favorite theme of neo-Darwinism. Joe explains the concept of "self-persuasion," which, he says, is "much loved by evolutionary psychologists":

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> It was pure armchair science, and it went like this: if you had lived in a group, as humans have always done, persuading others of your own needs and interests would be fundamental to your well-being. Sometimes you had to use cunning. Clearly you would be at your most convincing if you persuaded yourself first and did not even have to pretend to believe what you were saying. The kind of self-deluding individuals who tended to do this flourished, as did their genes. So it was we squabbled and scrapped, for our unique intelligence was always at the service of our special pleading and selective blindness to the weakness of our case. (112)

Joe's explanation of self-deception is an evolutionary account of narrative unreliability itself, and such an account may be taken as a not-so-subtle way of suggesting that Joe himself is unconsciously at the mercy of his own interests. Joe returns to the evolutionary value of self-persuasion later in the novel, after what he believes was an attempt on his life by Parry: "We lived in a mist of half-shared, unreliable perception, and our sense data came warped by a prism of desire and belief, which tilted our memories too" (196). This recognition does not change Joe's firm belief that Parry's intentions are murderous, but he does concede to himself that "Pitiless objectivity, especially about ourselves, was always a doomed social strategy."[16] Indeed, at this moment, Joe the narrator realizes fully the theoretical basis for the excessive trust that his earlier self placed in his own account of the attempted killing, but Joe the character is too entrenched in his own need to prove Parry's murderous aims to concede that his account might be mistaken.

Curiously, whether he knows it or not, Joe here echoes the philosopher whom Daniel Dennett calls "the second great sociobiologist [after Hobbes]" (461), Friedrich Nietzsche. Though Nietzsche did not read Darwin himself, he was familiar with Darwinian theory and was, as Dennett notes, a pointed critic of Herbert Spencer's interpretation of it. *On the Genealogy of Morals,* which describes a sociocultural "evolution" of Christian morality from a premoral state, begins with the identification of a paradox: "We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge [. . .] we are necessarily strangers to ourselves, we do not comprehend ourselves, we *have* to misunderstand ourselves" (15). The will to knowledge, ironically, impairs self-knowledge and promotes self-deception.

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In Nietzsche's evolutionary account, our instrument for acquiring knowledge, the intellect, did not develop as a means of seeking the truth; instead, from its beginnings it has been—to use Joe's own nicely Nietzschean formulation—"always at the service of our special pleading and selective blindness." In "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" Nietzsche describes the evolution of the intellect and its utility as a tool for cunning in plainly Darwinian language:

> The intellect, as a means for the preservation of the individual, unfolds its principal powers in simulation; for this is the means by which the weaker, less robust individuals preserve themselves, since they are denied the chance of waging the struggle for existence with horns or the fangs of beasts of prey. In man this art of simulation reaches its peak: here deception, flattery, lying and cheating, talking behind the back, posing, living in borrowed splendor, being masked, the disguise of convention, acting a role before others and before oneself—in short, the constant fluttering around the single flame of vanity, is so much the rule and the law that almost nothing is more incomprehensible than how an honest and pure drive for truth could make its appearance among men. (43)

For Nietzsche, if one begins with the fact of the animal's desire for self-preservation, the real problem is not how to account for cunning or deception—that much is almost self-evident, for "simulation" (*Verstellung*, perhaps better translated as "dissimulation")[17] is the primary function of the intellect, which is itself an evolutionary adaptation on the part of a physically disadvantaged species. The real problem, rather, is how to account for the intellect's desire to seek the truth in the first place, "how an honest and pure drive for truth could make its appearance among men." Joe reaches almost exactly the same insight, though with a radically different value judgment; for him, the servitude of the intellect to the instincts is precisely "why metaphysics and science were such courageous enterprises, such startling inventions, bigger than the wheel, bigger than agriculture" (196). To attempt disinterested knowledge is to overcome a deeply inbred penchant for self-interest and self-deception. But whereas Joe sees such striving as heroic, Nietzsche sees it as merely continued self-delusion. Nietzsche, in sum, invokes evolution not to argue for the supremacy of the human being as a creature more advanced than others

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(that is, "evolved" in a teleological, non-Darwinian sense), but on the contrary to indict what we could, with only slight anachronism, call the narcissism of the intellect. The intellect so values itself that it forgets its necessary service to the bodily interests that produced it in the first place. As he writes in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (again using a metaphor from biology): "[O]ur ideas, our values, our yeas and nays, our ifs and buts, grow out of us with the necessity with which a tree bears fruit" (16).

Nietzsche's reading of Darwin, by asserting the bodily origin of what appears as—but never fully attains the status of—disinterested knowledge, thus points up a paradox in contemporary neo-Darwinism, or at least in Joe's variety of it: in its very rationalism it forgets its corporeal origins, corporeal origins that are of course essential to any evolutionary, materialist account. The novel's attention to the question of self-deception, and to that of the reliability of narrative, perception, and memory, implies the very connection on which Nietzsche insists: between "our ideas [and] our values" and the entire organism.

Such a connection is of course the point with which I began—that McEwan, as a novelist, consistently presents his characters' intellectual positions as merely the fruit (Mellon?) or flower (Rose?) of their entire organic, psychological, physiological selves, including their unconscious interests. Joe's advocacy of empiricist investigation and rational inquiry, his "honest and pure drive for truth," then, is perfectly valid—except that it fails to recognize the ruses of reason itself. As Clarissa notes, Joe seems unable to apply to himself "those powers of rational analysis [he] take[s] such pride in" (235). McEwan's novel, in short, offers a Nietzschean critique of the intellect, which, while deriving from Darwinism, trains its attention on precisely that oxymoronic phenomenon which Clarissa decries in her attack on sociobiology: "rationalism gone berserk." Such excessive rationalism, an intellectual "new fundamentalism" or dogmatism, is an intellectualism that has forgotten its origins in the instincts and, believing itself disinterested, transmutes into a kind of blindness or even madness. Out of Joe's rational, neo-Darwinist account of self-deception emerges the very grounds for suspecting Joe's rational neo-Darwinism. Indeed what emerges is something like what Levine, in another context, calls a "critique of triumphant rationalism" (*Darwin Loves You* 101)—with the critique leveled as much at the triumphalism as the rationalism.

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The attractions of narrative

Joe's genealogical account of unreliability thus undercuts the very authority of his own intellectual position like a snake eating its own tail, and this circularity suggests that its inclusion in the novel is of paramount importance on a thematic level. In addition to this thematic reason for the digression, however, there is an immediate narrative reason—Joe has just searched, in paranoid fashion, through Clarissa's desk, seeking evidence of infidelity. Jealous because Clarissa has failed to sympathize with his concern about Parry's attention, spurred by the Iago of his own fantasy, Joe imagines Clarissa to be in love with another man—only now he envisages his sexual rival not as the long-dead Keats but rather, in Joe's heated phrase, as "Some hot little bearded fuck-goat of a postgraduate" (114). Far from being feminized (either as Clarissa herself or as the frail, dying Keats from whom there is little to fear), the literary is now figured as a threatening and emasculating rival.

Ironically, Joe represents his descent into paranoia as a descent into the literary—for in order to decode the hidden signs and symbols of Parry's veiled threats, Joe realizes, he needs a critic of Clarissa's talents:

> I was attempting to compile a dossier of threats, and while there were no single obvious examples, there were allusions and obvious disjunctures whose cumulative effect would not be lost on the mind of a policeman. It needed the skills of a literary critic like Clarissa to read between the lines of protesting love, but I knew that she would not help me. (162)

No longer disdaining the value of literary interpretation, Joe now believes that the tortured overreadings of the humanist can save him when his clear-eyed empiricism leaves him in the lurch. Once again, less conscious motives are plainly visible: Joe desires Clarissa herself, her love as much as her skills in reading, and his acknowledgment of the value of her professional work becomes a displaced lament for the loss of her love. But Joe, reading Parry's love letters, also needs the ability to make meaning out of incomplete or riddling texts, to supply narrative coherence over and above the empiricist gathering of data.

Thus it is that *Enduring Love,* for all Joe's discussion of science, contemplates, as Childs says, "the stories people tell in order to make sense of the world" (110) and even suggests, at its conclusion, "a common

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ground for fiction and science in their joint reliance on narrative" (116). But while science surely relies on narrative just as literature does, Joe is generally suspicious of what he calls "the power and attractions of narrative" (44), particularly in science. In a magazine article he is writing, Joe links the use of narrative in science to "the nineteenth-century culture of the amateur" (51) and the Victorian novel; as modernism rose in the arts, he argues, so science became the domain of experts and dispensed with storytelling in favor of "hard-edged theories" (52). Yet he soon recognizes that his own article is also a "narrative in itself"—and furthermore, a "tired one" (51), one in which he does not even believe, and which he eventually discards because "it wasn't science. It was journalism" (54). Again Joe's own amateurism, his role as a writer rather than a scientist proper, troubles him. Even the way he describes his own marketable skills betrays a certain disdain for the construction of narrative: "People say I have a talent for clarity. I can spin a decent narrative out of the stumblings, backtrackings, and random successes that lie behind most scientific breakthroughs" (79).[18]

Joe explains that he regards "the power and attractions of narrative" warily because they cloud scientific judgment. And while the precise role that narrative plays in scientific thought is far from simple, it is worth pointing out that one of the most frequent complaints made against neo-Darwinism is exactly this excessive dependence on narrative. The biologist H. Allen Orr writes that "a serious problem with evolutionary psychology" is that its

> research program shows a curious tendency to invert itself. [. . .] [T]he fact that we can conceive of an adaptive tale about why a behavior should evolve *becomes* the chief reason for suspecting it's genetic. [. . .] And so the inversion occurs: the evolutionary story rings true; but evolution requires genes; therefore, it's genetic. This move is so easy and so seductive that evolutionary psychologists sometimes forget a hard truth: a Darwinian story is not Mendelian evidence. A Darwinian story is a story. (18)

Orr's complaint is a version of Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin's longstanding critique of sociobiology for telling "adaptive stories" (581)—fictions that it then takes as facts. Orr's critique, like Joe's, places narrative in a secondary role to "evidence." Thus if Joe's professional crisis is a fear that he is somehow tainted by the literary, or by narrative, then his desire

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for Clarissa's help in decoding the threats from Parry is a belated recognition of a need for narrative that had been denied or repressed.

The entire novel in fact is saturated with references to story and narrative. Joe describes his initial rush toward the balloon as "racing into this story and its labyrinths" (1); he notes that retelling and shaping the account of Logan's death makes it less frightening (39); Jean Logan's belief in her husband's infidelity is "a narrative that only grief [. . .] could devise" (132); an anecdote about Keats's visit to Wordsworth in 1817 is said to be inaccurate yet valuable: "It isn't true but it tells the truth" (183). And so on. Moreover, despite Joe's neo-Darwinist attribution of countless phenomena to "human nature," he betrays an awareness of the way in which narratives, including his own, are shaped by the clichés of popular culture. During the initial, failed rescue, Joe likens his situation to a cartoon twice (3, 16), to a soap opera (23), and to a dream in which the language of his thoughts scrolls "across a screen" (21). At another moment, he tries to resist Hollywood formulas that "beguile us with happy endings" (231). Recounting a fight with Clarissa, he notes his own "exaggeratedly slow" manner of speaking and even questions his own Darwinism: "Where do we learn such tricks? Are they inscribed, along with the rest of our emotional repertoire? Or do we get them from the movies?" (93). This power of cultural narratives to shape the way in which we see the world is a problem that McEwan the novelist faces along with Joe Rose the narrator. Critics have noted, not always happily, McEwan's debt to pulp formulas:[19] Joe, like many endangered male heroes of Hollywood thrillers, finds (or believes) himself the only rational person in the universe, discounted by his wife, police officers, acquaintances, and professional contacts.

Despite Joe the narrator's awareness of the seductions and distortions of narrative, Joe the character, by the middle of the novel, is narrativizing everything; every event in his world is assimilated to the story of Jed Parry, the sufferer of de Clérambault's syndrome. Just as the pre-Darwinian Jed sees the signs of God's love and presence everywhere in the world, so the ultra-Darwinian Joe sees everywhere the signs of Jed's love and presence. Overreading in this sense has been seen as a sign of madness in the novel since *Don Quixote*. As Foucault writes in his famous pages on Cervantes, Quixote's "whole journey is a quest for similitudes: the slightest analogies are pressed into service as dormant signs" (47). Thus in modern times "the madman fulfils the function of *homosemanticism*: he groups all signs together and leads them with a resemblance that never

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ceases to proliferate" (49; Foucault's italics). Just as Cervantes's Duke and Duchess, seeking entertainment, are pulled into Don Quixote's lunatic fantasies, so Joe becomes mad by mimicking the madness of his pursuer, stalking his own stalker; in order to bait Parry into making a violent threat that will give Joe grounds to involve the police, Joe goes so far as to speak Parry's imagined secret language, leaving coded "signals" for him in the rain-slicked hedges. Joe's "rational" attempts to protect himself thus come to mirror Jed's irrational, religious belief in Joe's love. Clarissa even notes, "His writing's rather like yours" (108). Such madness corrodes the reader's belief in Joe's reliability not only on an evaluative level but also in his presentation and interpretation of fundamental narrative facts. Clarissa hints that Joe might have "invented" Parry (90, 93), and Joe himself feels of his elusive stalker, "It was almost as if he didn't exist" (158). The fact that Joe the narrator occasionally does acknowledge his earlier self's emotional blindnesses only confounds the issue further. The reader, far from being able simply to write off Joe as "unreliable," is instead left without clear bearings on how to assess the events that he describes.[20]

One of the novel's many narrative twists is that Joe, as paranoid as he seems, turns out to be perfectly correct about Parry's violent aims, and the first appendix provides a psychiatric case history of Jed Parry, confirming Joe's amateur but empiricist diagnosis of de Clérambault's syndrome. Although this confirmation can be read as an authorial endorsement of both Joe's judgments about Parry and his confidence in his scientific epistemology, it cannot resolve the novel's conflicts among worldviews: Joe proves to be reliable on a factual level, but any larger evaluation of events remains up for grabs.[21] After Parry is apprehended, Clarissa can still write to Joe: "I was completely wrong and I'm sorry, really sorry. [. . .] But what I was also trying to say last night was this: your being right is not a simple matter" (233). Despite what Joe scorns as Clarissa's "clammy emotional logic" (239), the novel continues to intimate some imprecise truth in her claim that Joe's reaction to the ballooning accident and the stalking was the source of the disintegration of their love.

In other words, for Clarissa and (I would argue) for the novel as a whole, the factual vindication of Joe's triumphalist rationalism does nothing to negate the significance of his paranoia. Lacan's famous axiom about the paranoid is wholly applicable here: even if the jealous husband is right about his wife's infidelity, such a fact in no way means that the husband is not paranoid. As Slavoj Žižek writes:

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> [E]ven if all the facts [the husband] quotes in support of his jealousy are true, even if his wife really is sleeping around with other men, this does not change one bit the fact that his jealousy is a pathological, paranoid construction. (*Sublime* 48)

Such a counterintuitive thesis holds, according to Žižek, because "pathological jealously is not a matter of getting the facts false, but of the way these facts are integrated into the subject's libidinal economy" (*Enjoy* 220). For Lacan, in Žižek's words, it is not the facts but fantasy that "gives support to that which we call 'reality'" (*Sublime* 44). A perfect example of the way in which fantasy so operates is the apocryphal story, told at the fatal birthday lunch for Clarissa, about Keats's visit to, and rejection by, Wordsworth—a story that is said to "tell the truth" even though it isn't "true." Whereas the commonplace reading of this idea would be that literature extracts a "higher" truth than history—as Aristotle says, it tells of universal truths rather than particular ones (54)—Lacan's notion is exactly the opposite. For Lacan, the Keats story would be "apocryphal" even if it were true, because it meshes so neatly with the ideological needs of its audience. It confirms a reality that is in the first place structured by fantasy, by story.

In this sense, Joe's paranoid knowledge about Jed is wrong even though it is factually quite right—much as Clarissa suggests in her final letter. Such a Lacanian analysis of Joe's pathology, a pathology in which the facts will always confirm the symbolic fantasy structure, suggests de Clérambault's syndrome itself, the illness with which Jed is diagnosed. For in de Clérambault's cases, we learn, the obsession of the patient is completely invulnerable to any response he or she might receive from the object of the obsession. This invulnerability is what makes Jed's love, according to the case history, "a most lasting form of love" (250) and also what makes it so terrifying. As the case history puts it:

> The fact that the object is already married is likely to be regarded as irrelevant. His protestations of indifference or even hatred are seen as paradoxical or contradictory; her conviction that he "really" loves her remains fixed. (250)

Such an analysis conforms perfectly to Žižek's Lacanian understanding of ideology: "An ideology really succeeds when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favor" (*Sublime*

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49). Indeed, according to one historian of psychiatry, "Clérambault described erotomania as a representation of reality that though insane was 'logical'" (Roudinesco 25). Such an overlap between Lacan's thinking and de Clérambault's should not be a surprise: the thinker whom Lacan called his "only master in psychiatry" (Lacan 5n5; Roudinesco 25) was neither Freud nor Lacan's own analyst Rudolph Lowenstein but an early supervisor at the Paris Police Special Infirmary for the Insane, a mentor who proved enormously influential on Lacan's first theoretical work in paranoia and psychosis, a teacher who even fell out with Lacan over the similarity of their theoretical work—Gaetan de Clérambault.[22]

Because Lacan's theory of paranoia derives directly from de Clérambault's thinking about erotomania, Joe's "normal" Lacanian-style paranoia and Jed's de Clérambault's syndrome are related diagnoses, and it is hardly accidental that the two antagonists share so much. Clarissa after all calls Joe's neo-Darwinism a "new fundamentalism," suggesting a parallel to Jed's fundamentalism of the old, Christian variety. As Morrison points out, Parry is, at least in Clarissa's view, "the kind of phantom that only I [Joe] could have called up, a spirit of my dislocated, incomplete character" (McEwan, *Enduring Love* 110)—in Morrison's words, an image of "the neurosis implicit in Joe's own consciousness" (260).[23] This is not to claim that Joe is every bit as mad as Jed, but to emphasize the continuity between the pathological love Jed feels for Joe and the "normal" love of Joe and Clarissa. One of the more unsettling suggestions of the novel is that love always courts pathology. "De Clérambault's syndrome was a dark, distorting mirror that reflected and parodied a brighter world of lovers whose reckless abandon to their cause was sane" (137), Joe thinks, and the psychiatrists Paul Mullen and Michele Pathé quoted in appendix 1 confirm his judgment: "the pathological extensions of love not only touch upon but overlap with normal experience, and it is not always easy to accept that one of our most valued experiences may merge into psychopathology" (259). Thus appendix 2, in a final gothic flourish, offers the reader a last letter from an institutionalized Jed, a letter that Joe never sees. In this final intrusion of the epistolary on Joe's generally monological narrative, Jed's last, "lost" letter eerily parallels the (apocryphal?) lost letters of Keats so desperately sought by Clarissa. Jed's is the letter that proves to be the "cry of undying love not touched by despair."

Both the rational scientist and the insane religious man can equally become prisoners in their own symbolic constructions. This symmetry

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does not suggest that science is itself a faith (or any similar vulgarism), but it does imply a critique of neo-Darwinism by showing the ways in which rational faculties can be controlled and directed by fantastic desires. Lacan's point about paranoia, historically derived from de Clérambault's study of erotomania and one of the main topics of *Enduring Love*, is the priority of fantasy in structuring the way reality is understood. In this regard, the endurance of Jed's love serves to undermine (once again) the triumphalist aspirations of Joe's neo-Darwinist worldview.

A happy marriage?

The end of the novel contains another twist as well: Joe and Clarissa's reunification and adoption of a child, a narrative resolution of which the reader learns in only the most oblique manner—buried in a subordinate clause that is buried in appendix 1, a dry, technical case history of Jed Parry, where Joe and Clarissa appear merely as initials:[24]

> While in this case R and M were reconciled and later successfully adopted a child, some victims [of de Clérambault patients] have had to divorce or emigrate, and others have needed psychiatric treatment because of the distress the patients have caused them.[25] (259)

The obliquely mentioned adoption suggests that despite the threats to it, Joe and Clarissa's love does indeed endure. The reunion and adoption, occurring outside Joe's narrative, stand as a subtle but unmistakable rebuke to the evolutionary psychology that Joe has been promulgating for the entire novel: adoption entails a love uniquely free from immediate Darwinian motives. Joe and Clarissa take the chance on a parental love that offers no hope of ensuring the survival of their genes, wagering that they will be able to free themselves from the tyranny of their Darwinian inheritance—snapping the leash on which culture is held by the genes.

In this last detail, *Enduring Love* holds out hope for a rapprochement between the disciplines. To return to the title question of this essay: biologists, it turns out, can't read poetry because (or, more charitably, when) they become triumphant rationalists, refusing to acknowledge the origins of their ideas in their interests—economic, psychological, or corporeal.[26] Conversely, literary critics can't read science when, like Clarissa, they attend solely to an instinctual or emotional register and dismiss reflexively

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the legitimacy of science and reason. And finally, adherents of both the neo-Darwinist and the religious worldview fail as readers when they become delusional Quixotean overreaders—whether de Clérambault's sufferers like Jed or mere garden-variety Lacanian paranoiacs like Joe—for whom the external world is effortlessly subsumed into a fantasy structure, a story, or a novel. If a happy marriage is to exist, McEwan's novel ultimately suggests, it must exist somewhere between these failures.

Notes

1. As Robert Wright observes, most current-day academics applying Darwin's ideas to the social sciences prefer the label *evolutionary psychology* to *sociobiology* because of the right-wing political connotations that Wilson's sociobiology acquired during the 1970s. This is not to deny that "doctrinal differences" (Wright 394) exist between the two subschools. According to Joseph Carroll, "Evolutionary psychologists emphasize proximal mechanisms of adaptation" whereas "sociobiological thinkers [. . .] place a greater emphasis on the direct and immediate pursuit of reproductive advantage" (107); the newer school allows for a more flexible understanding of the mechanisms by which particular traits might lead to evolutionary advantage. With this in mind, I will favor the term *evolutionary psychology,* though not with exceptional rigor, since the doctrinal differences are relatively inconsequential for my argument. I should also distinguish between my uses of *Darwinism* and *neo-Darwinism*. Darwin, famously unaware of Mendelian genetics, lacked a causal mechanism for the inheritance of characteristics; not until the synthesis of Darwin and Mendel in the early twentieth century did the language of evolution become spiraled around the language of genetics. In this essay, then, I will use *neo-Darwinism* to refer to the schools that have emerged over the last 30 years or so; *Darwinism* will refer to a broader invocation of Darwin's thought.

2. Among the major books in this field are Carroll, Dissanayake, and Storey. Special issues of *Philosophy and Literature* (25.2, Oct. 2001) and *Poetics Today* (23.1, Spring 2002) have have been published on the topic. Articles by Brian Boyd and Harold Fromm offer overviews. On Darwin and the Victorians the most lasting works are by Gillian Beer and George Levine (*Darwin and the Novelists*). Margot Norris and Paul Sheehan explore Darwin's impact on modernism.

3. Critics have noted and analyzed the conflicts among science, religion, and literature in *Enduring Love,* but they have paid relatively little attention to the novel's engagement with neo-Darwinism in particular. Timothy Bewes reads

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Enduring Love in the context of "philosophical honesty," asking whether its philosophical questions are genuinely engaged or decided in advance. Rhiannon Davies and Jago Morrison both read the novel as an attempt by the narrator to reassert his masculine identity as a subject in the face of multiple threats. Olga Cameron's Lacanian reading also sees the initial incident as a symbolic castration that unravels the narrator's identity and the rest of the narrative as an attempt to reconstitute that identity even as it reveals its dissolution. David Malcolm and Peter Childs offer more general thematic studies.

4. McEwan has returned to these themes in his most recent novel *Saturday*, where he stages a similar conflict between literature and science and explores the links between mind and brain. The main character is a brain surgeon who repeatedly quotes from the final paragraph of Darwin's *Origin of Species* ("there is grandeur in this view of life") but happens to be a philistine when it comes to literature, unable to find value in *Anna Karenina;* his daughter is a poet. The plot hinges on the recitation of Arnold's "Dover Beach," a poem whose emotional power alters the mind (and hence the brain) of a criminal character who, like Jed Parry, is pathological and violent.

5. McEwan's comments in interviews suggest a strong sympathy for neo-Darwinism. See notes 14 and 20.

6. A brief summary: Joe Rose, the novel's narrator, is a middle-aged popular science writer married by common law to a Keats scholar named Clarissa Mellon, who cannot bear children as a result of a medical accident. During a picnic, Joe attempts to save a boy being borne away in a helium balloon by an unexpected gust, and in the rescue attempt—which results in the death of another would-be rescuer, John Logan—he meets a born-again Christian named Jed Parry, who becomes obsessed with Joe and stalks him, professing the undying quality of both his own love and God's love for the atheistic Joe. From this initial incident arise several plotlines: Joe's reciprocal obsession with his stalker, which makes his behavior appear increasingly desperate, irrational, and even paranoid; the resurgence of Joe's old doubts about the value of his work as a journalistic popularizer rather than an academic scientist; an awakening of Clarissa's deep grief for the loss of the phantom children she can never bear, and her growing impatience with Joe's inability to understand such feelings; and, resulting from these individual crises, a joint one—the disintegration of the love between Joe and Clarissa, a love that Joe repeatedly describes as exquisite and precious.

7. Susan Wolfson cautions against decontextualizing these lines too hastily, since the rainbow can also suggest the illusoriness of the aesthetic. Denise Gigante points out that this view was widespread among the British romantics.

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S. Levine, in *Darwin Loves You*, attempts to negotiate the conflict between recognizing the validity of an often disenchanting science and retaining the values of an enchanting humanism by attending to the affective qualities of Darwin's prose and the sense of wonder that he often found in nature. Contemporary neo-Darwinism often assumes a rhetoric of disenchantment, but Darwin's own writing retains a romantic enthusiasm for the natural world.

9. The relation of evolutionary psychology to psychoanalysis is ambivalent. Freud's interest in instinct, his view of the self as a battlefield of warring desires, and his recognition of the capacity of the conscious mind to deceive itself, all anticipate the views held by current-day neo-Darwinists. Yet neo-Darwinism seems often to disdain the inadequately scientific methods of Freud's research and speculations. Joe, despite his flashes of psychoanalytic insight, refers to psychoanalysis as "fabulation run riot" (53), dismisses the value of "professional listener[s]," calls "the talking cure" a "genteel fraud" (107), and, even when his marriage is on the brink of dissolution, suggests that "[t]oo much [is] made in pop psychology [. . .] of talking things through" (155).

10. Joe by the end of the novel is no longer so rationalistic that he can't find a mystical quasi divinity in particle physics. He describes the mystery of the electromagnetic force that holds together a water molecule as "a mysterious powerful force" (243); later in the chapter, another witness of the balloon accident says, "These things bind you together, you know" (247). Childs points out the obvious parallel to the force of love binding a couple together as well as the less obvious ambiguity of the metaphor: the triangular model of the water molecule could represent a child binding together parents or it might suggest a more violent love triangle involving the dangerous Jed Parry (116). The notion of finding wonder through science rather than by denying it is a major theme for both Levine (*Darwin Loves You*) and Adam Philips.

11. The first-person form tends to encourage unreliability: first, because the knowledge possessed by a particularized, embodied human narrator has limits that a disembodied third-person narrator logically does not; and second, because the voice of a first-person narrator inevitably performs a characterizing function beyond the presentation of narrative data. Michal Glowinski (104) and Franz Stanzel (115) emphasize the logical differences between first- and third-person narrators; David Goldknopf (38–39) suggests that first-person narrators always have an implicit "confessional" motive; and Dan Shen discusses the characterizing function of unreliability. My use of the term *unreliable* deserves some explication. Felix Martinez-Bonati distinguishes between narrators' "unreliability as persons" and their "structural [un]reliability as narrators" (115), between unreliable evaluation and unreliable presentation of narrative

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facts that constitute the fictional world in which the narrator exists. Joe's unreliability is largely of the first variety: to the extent that he (as a narrator) loses the reader's trust, it is generally through his judgments rather than his basic presentation of narrative data. But at times—as I will discuss—this evaluative unreliability slides into factual unreliability; the reader comes to suspect the fundamental narrative facts that he presents, a suspicion whose importance is by no means nullified when his version of the facts is ultimately validated. But if Joe's judgments as a narrator are sometimes unreliable, his judgments as a character are also sometimes questionable—and questioned, if indirectly, by his own (later) narrating self. Thus Joe's narrative may be aptly described in Dorrit Cohn's terms as "dissonant self-narration": "a lucid narrator turning back on a past self steeped in ignorance, confusion, and delusion" (145). Yet even here the problem is subtle and complex, for Joe as a narrator is rarely explicitly judgmental about his former self, and when Joe the character makes aberrant judgments, Joe the narrator often withholds his own qualification of them. In these instances the self-narration is more consonant than "dissonant," and a greater degree of explicit mental distance—more dissonance—between narrating Joe and narrated Joe would likely stabilize the reader's interpretation and generate more confidence in the judgments of the narrator. In this essay, where relevant, I distinguish Joe the narrator from Joe the character.

12. Malcolm emphasizes the characterizing function of Joe's language and worldview and discusses Joe's character at length (164–69). He calls Joe a "substantially reliable first-person narrator" (160) but concedes that "his rationalist, materialist approach to things can seem reductive" (170). Davies notes the self-consciousness with which Joe presents his narrative, particularly the opening scene, and though she does not use the term *unreliable,* she interprets this self-consciousness as a sign of a "masculine self-fashioning" (109) through which Joe writes himself as a hero, even if a failed one.

13. Davies concurs: "Whatever Parry's mental problems, his analysis of Joe seems astonishingly sane and very accurate" (118).

14. McEwan cites these works with unadulterated praise:

> I think we've been very fortunate—we've had a golden age in science, for 15 years. The number of highly literate scientists writing for an intelligent lay public is extraordinary. There's a kind of science writing that seems to bridge the gap between informing laymen but also informing other sciences. To take an immediate example—Steven Pinker's book on language certainly addresses not just lay people like myself but other scientists outside his immediate field. Similarly, my own particular intellectual hero is E. O. Wilson. He's a biologist. He wrote *The*

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> *Diversity of Life*, and that was just genius. The thing that really interested me was the extent to which scientists are now trespassing into other areas. (Interview)

15. The degree to which applying Darwin to the social sciences necessarily implies social Darwinism or laissez-faire economics has always been controversial, but a certain homology does exist between the "invisible hand" of Adam Smith and the blind "agency" of natural selection, a homology that can lead in both cases to the naturalistic fallacy—a slippage in both cases between the *is* and the *ought*.

16. In an argument nicely compatible with Joe's recognition of the impossibility of objectivity, Ellen Spolsky argues that the deconstructive view of language as necessarily ambiguous has a strong basis in evolutionary theory: language has acquired a near-optimal or "good enough" balance between vagueness and rigidity, either of which quality alone would make language an adaptation less effective in the struggle for survival.

17. My thanks to J. D. Minninger for his help with Nietzsche's German.

18. Most of the commentators discuss the the novel's self-consciousness about narrative. Morrison maintains that narrative functions as a "means of containment and control" (257) in Joe's attempt "to constitute and to defend his embattled masculinity" (255) but also concedes that "the instability and disjunction potentially implicit in narration are constantly foregrounded" (257). Davies similarly reads Joe's self-consciousness about his own narration as a sign of an underlying awareness of the fragility of his own masculine identity.

19. James Wood, for example, dislikes the novel for its close adherence to the formula of a Hollywood thriller (qtd. in Childs 107).

20. What further complicates any judgment on Joe's reliability are the extrafictional comments of the author. McEwan has described E. O. Wilson as "my own particular intellectual hero" and acknowledged that while Joe's scorn for literature is meant to be "provocative," he shares Joe's belief that many humanists undervalue the sciences (Interview). Yet even if the extranovelistic McEwan actually endorses Joe's neo-Darwinist views, Joe might still be said to be unreliable. McEwan could be lying or joking or posturing; and his comments in interviews can support a range of interpretations. He has said, for example, "There is something about Clarissa's take on the world that Joe badly needs" (Interview); but also that he "wanted [. . .] to write a book somewhat in praise of rationality" (qtd. in Childs 109). One should also note that while Booth himself measures a narrator's reliability against "the implied author's norms" (158), he also takes pains not to equate the implied author with the

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actual author (71–76). One can thus, without regressing to New Critical orthodoxy, still invoke D. H. Lawrence's old injunction, "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale," and set out "to save the tale from the artist who created it" (2). McEwan might, in other words, be seen as a critic of neo-Darwinism in spite of himself—his novelist's instincts overcoming the intellectualism of the novel's philosophical content.

21. Interestingly, readers who focus on the construction of Joe's masculinity (Davies, Morrison) tend to be suspicious of his Darwinism and his rationality, while others (Childs, Malcolm) incline to the judgment that the novel itself ultimately endorses his values.

22. Cameron does not discuss this connection despite her detailed articulation of Lacanian theory. For biographical details of de Clérambault's influence on Lacan, see Roudinesco 22–25. Roudinesco writes of de Clérambault:

> Despite his conservatism regarding theory, he agreed with Freud that madness was close to truth, reason to unreason, and coherence to delirium. Clérambault's influence was evident in Lacan's first theoretical text, published in July 1931 [. . .] "Structures of Paranoid Psychoses." (24)

23. The doubling of Joe and Jed also conforms to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's discussion of "male homosexual panic" in many respects. Sedgwick writes:

> Because the paths of male entitlement, especially in the nineteenth century, required certain intense male bonds that were not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated bonds, an endemic and ineradicable state of what I am calling male homosexual panic became the normal condition of male heterosexual entitlement. (185)

Men acquire a privileged social position only at the risk of straying from the homosocial to the homosexual, making the threat of identification as homosexual a threat to one's identity in a social sense. That one can never know whether one is in fact truly homosexual only increases the anxiety under which male power is exercised. Thus accumulates "a reservoir of potential for *violence* caused by the self-ignorance that this regime constitutively enforces" (186; Sedgwick's italics)—a reservoir that overflows at the end of *Enduring Love*. Joe and Jed's bond, forged in the masculine homosocial activity of a physical rescue, leads to a doubling whereby Joe is under increased anxiety to distinguish his heterosexual identity from Jed's homosexual one. Not coincidentally, then, does *Enduring Love* borrow from the tradition of the gothic, "the literary genre in which homophobia found its most apt and ramified embodiment" (Sedgwick 186). Therefore when Clarissa hears Joe's first reports on Parry's phone calls and letters, she jokes, "A secret gay love affair with a Jesus

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freak! I can't wait to tell your science friends" (60) and asks whether the two men are getting married. While a traditional psychoanalytic reading would say that her joke expresses the unconscious truth of Joe's latent homosexual desire, a Sedgwickian reading would claim, with somewhat different emphasis, that Clarissa indicates the shifting terrain on which male homosocial relations must always be enacted.

24. Like the news of Lolita's death that Nabokov hides in the fictional preface to his novel, here essential narrative information is deliberately concealed from the uncareful reader. McEwan apparently shares Nabokov's interest in word games too; as Nabokov planted anagrams of his own name in his novels, so the authors of appendix 1, Wenn and Camia, anagrammatically recombine to spell Ian McEwan. Other parallels abound between *Lolita* and *Enduring Love*, particularly between Humbert Humbert's relation to Quilty and Joe's to Parry: the temporary uncertainty about the reality of the narrator's persecution by his "double," the culmination of the conflict between the men in gun violence ostensibly in defense of a beloved woman, and the gothic stylings and homosexual panic described by Sedgwick (see note 23).

25. Of the critics cited here, only Cameron and Childs seem to note the significance of the adoption.

26. This is a trait in neo-Darwinism that Levine critiques at length; he quotes William Connolly on the tendency of the rationalist/scientific worldview to "misrecognize itself and [. . .] to advance dismissive interpretations of any culture or ethical practice that engages the visceral register of being" (qtd. in *Darwin Loves You* 35).

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Romantic Reverence and Modernist Representation: Vision, Power, and the Shattered Form of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

Ella Zohar Ophir

When John Grierson coined the term *documentary,* he identified "things to be corrected" as its staple subject: the nascent genre was to be defined in part by its dealing "with conditions that can be changed by human initiative" (qtd. in Stott 9).[1] Effaced in that passive formulation is the power structure that made documentary practice both necessary and ethically troublesome. For the kinds of conditions that attracted documentarians could rarely be changed by the people who inhabited them—who were sometimes themselves identified as the "things to be corrected." Documentarians are usually outsiders, and though seldom possessed of direct political power, they wield at least the intermediary power to represent those who "cannot represent themselves."[2] But observation and documentation of otherness from a position of relative power, as Paula Rabinowitz suggests, always entails a degree of voyeurism and manipulation that, at best, may be reciprocal: "the documentarian is also subject to mockery as an outsider. . . . The joke is on everyone. . . . We are complicit in the theft of truth, truth gained as the [documentarian] deceives his lying informant" (7).

While the economy floundered in the 1930s, slipping millions of Americans down into a new powerlessness, documentary flourished. Partly but not entirely under the aegis of New Deal programs, photographers and writers produced a plethora of works documenting the ravages of the

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Depression across the country. The economic crisis was obviously of political and historical importance, but the mood of the reading public made poverty a marketable subject as well. Thus in 1936 the business monthly *Fortune* sent James Agee and Walker Evans to produce an illustrated feature on tenant farmers in Alabama. The initial product of that assignment was declared unfit for the pages of the magazine; the ultimate product, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* finally published in 1941, is the strangest documentary work of that era. Agee threw himself into the project with an intensity his editor could hardly have anticipated. He composed an unflinching record not just of his desperately impoverished subjects but of the problems with any such record—particularly the exercise of power it entails and the limits of representational fidelity. Agee interrogates every premise and presumption of documentary practice and condemns his own complicity; he charges himself with violation, betrayal, and abysmal failure, and his readers with sentimentality, fatuity, and bad faith.

The 400-odd pages of *Famous Men* can be seen as a case study in how modernist self-consciousness hopelessly dissolves political clarity, but Agee's tortured scruples have elicited more respect than dismissal. Academic critics largely accept both his anatomy of the ethical problems of documentary representation and his apparent conclusion about them: that the inevitably fragmentary and distorted representation of the lives of the oppressed for commercial publication "seems impudent, seems traitorous in the deepest: and to do less badly seems impossible" (88)—and yet not to investigate and represent at all is to "betray . . . still worse" (89). In short, damned if you do, but damneder if you don't. Assuming, then, that Agee accepts that the violations of social documentary are justified by its potential to prompt remedial action, commentary on *Famous Men* has been largely devoted to identifying the textual and photographic strategies Agee and Evans use to mitigate the imbalance of power between themselves and their subjects.

This focus, however, leads us to overlook one of the most pervasive concerns of the text. If Agee is working on the premise that documentary representation, though necessarily distorted, may lead to remedial action, why does he spend so much time straining toward representational fidelity, as though perfect mimesis of the tenant farmers and their conditions of life would in itself achieve something significant? "This is a *book* only by necessity" (xi; Agee's emphasis) he declares in his preface—not "it is necessary to write this book." The latter statement would indicate a mea-

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sure taken in response to a political problem; the former indicates, rather, a response to a mimetic one.

Famous Men is in part a reaction against the admixtures of condescension and sentimentality present in some of the period's documentaries—particularly Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell's commercially successful *You Have Seen Their Faces,* which Agee attacks directly. Critics have detailed how Agee counters Bourke-White and Caldwell's authoritative tone with anguished self-doubt, their detachment with immersion, their meliorism with tragic fatalism, and so forth.[3] But his approach to representation is not just reactive. It is also impelled by a positive faith that derives from a strain of romanticism: the reverential stance toward creation exemplified in the poetics of Wordsworth, Emerson, and Whitman. This romantic lineage also explains two other distinctive aspects of *Famous Men:* its antipathy to art and its residual pastoralism. To recognize these elements is not to say, as Evans reportedly did, that Agee was a "raging Romantic" (qtd. in Casey 40). Rather, it is the basis for recognizing how his ambivalence about his own romanticism generated *Famous Men*'s distinctive modernism.

Formally and stylistically, *Famous Men* has to be one of the most flamboyantly modernist compositions in English, and yet it seldom appears in accounts of American modernism or in discussions of the modernism/realism oppositions of the 1930s. This cannot be wholly explained by the text's generic classification: modernist studies has readily extended its borders to include nonfictional texts, including 1930s reportage and the productions of the Mass Observation project in England. Rather, the neglect of *Famous Men* seems due at least in part to the urban bias of modernist studies. Its textual derangement does not issue from a teeming and discordant metropolis nor from a scene of brutal industrialism but from a confrontation with a technologically primitive rural community on a distant fringe of American modernity. A number of critics, however, have claimed *Famous Men* for *post*modernism. T. V. Reed, for instance, makes the case that the "heterogeneity and pastichelike qualities" of *Famous Men* make it "postmodernism *avant la lettre*" (157). Keith Williams suggests that because *Famous Men* "deconstructed the factual art of the New Deal through critique of its own representational processes," it "mark[s] the transition from the ambivalent assimilation of and/or resistance to modernism in American documentary to full-blown postmodernism"

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(173). And yet neither Reed nor Williams indicates why this prescient or transitional postmodernism is not better called modernism.

Reed explains that Agee and Evans

> incorporate and interrogate the literary and photographic techniques of the "high modernist" era . . . in such a way that the representational richness of these forms is made to serve those who have been most fully denied access to such riches. (157)

The implication is that a miserly modernism had meanly guarded its hoard, and *Famous Men,* by putting modernist capital into honorable service, becomes postmodernist. But that implication relies on an unacceptably limited definition of modernism; it also undermines Reed's own argument that the text is an exemplary form of "postmodernist *realism*"—a practice he distinguishes from "self-reflexive, realism-disrupting techniques of modernism *and* postmodernism" (my emphasis) on the grounds that it "places these techniques in tension with realist claims to represent and intervene in political life" (157). Now the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is lost, the latter joining the former in being defined by hermetic disengagement. Likewise, Williams finds that the "disturbing flock of questions about reality, truth, subjectivity, and language raised by modernist writing" are "welcomed into" Agee's text (173), and he notes debts to Faulkner, Joyce, and modernist practices such as collage and chronological shuffling (175–76). He does not explain his initial claim for its specifically postmodern status, which seems blurred even in his adjustment of the descriptor *postmodern* to "post/modern" (163).[4]

The question of classification is indeed academic, but not in the derogatory sense. Claims for the text's postmodernism do seem to be based on the identification of modernism with hermeticism, a simplification that is no longer supportable. But, more importantly, it is not just the interrogation of representational conventions that marks *Famous Men* as modernist but its profound internal tensions as well. Modernism can be distinguished from postmodernism in part by the note of loss that accompanies its confrontation of the irreparable damage to unities and absolutes. Agee absorbed from romanticism a conviction of the sanctity of creation; a belief that the experience of beauty is the highest state of consciousness; and an image of the natural world as an organic whole into which the good human life is harmoniously integrated. One of the distinct dramatic

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lines in *Famous Men* is the fate of those convictions in the double crucible of his experience: the comprehension of the wretchedness before him and the task of representing it.

Agee approaches documentary representation in an attitude of essentially romantic reverence for all created things, however humble; his initial concern is only to divorce that reverential spirit from its old bedfellow, the romantic imagination. Wishing to lay down the tools of power, he renounces the transformative operations of the creative mind in favor of the self-effacement of mechanical mimesis. But power, he finds, is not so easily shed. The experience of sanctity and beauty underlying his mimetic humility appears to be inaccessible to the cruelly stunted spirits he means to honour, and with this realization his reverence becomes the mark and shame of his privilege. Agee's supreme valuation of that sacralized aesthetic experience does survive his confrontation of dire material struggle, but the experience is stripped of at least half its mystery. Reverential consciousness, he will insist, rests heavily on a minimum level of economic security, one that affords the mind a degree of distance from the world to which it attends.

"Spilt religion" and the real

"Above all else: in God's name don't think of it as Art," Agee orders at the end of his postprefatory preamble to *Famous Men* (12). The injunction is explained in part by his disgust at the ease with which shattering acts of creation, once given the honorific, circulate as cultural capital: "people hear Beethoven . . . over a bridge game, or to relax"; "van Gogh is the man who cut off his ear and whose yellows became recently popular in window decorations" (11). But for all its self-reflexiveness and willful disorder, *Famous Men* was clearly a documentary account, typical in its subject matter and its phototextual form. Why then does Agee anticipate generic misappropriation?

He is particularly concerned to defend the factuality of his account. His preface, for instance, includes a patient explanation of the ontological distinction between the subjects of fiction on one hand and documentary on the other:

> In a novel, a house or person has his meaning, his existence, entirely through the writer. Here, a house or a person has only the

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> most limited of his meaning through me: his true meaning is much huger. It is that he *exists,* in actual being, as you do and as I do, and as no character of the imagination can possibly exist. (9; Agee's emphasis)

Read in a certain tone, this is a bemusing condescension. By 1936 documentary was a distinct genre, hardly liable to be confused with fiction or fanciful belles-lettres by the general readership or by critics.[5] Nonetheless, Agee feels the need to make, and reiterate, the point: "nothing here is invented," he reminds us. "[Y]ou should so far as possible forget that this is a book . . . you should know, in other words, that it has no part in that realm where disbelief is habitually suspended" (217), he insists again—as if readers treated everything between two covers as fiction. Historians and critics have now analyzed the many contrivances of Depression-era documentaries, but in their own time these works were almost certain to be accepted as truthful accounts, at least in the sense of their not being fabricated or fictionalized. The term *propaganda* was thrown about to discredit some documentaries, but this was to charge them with being tendentious presentations of the facts, not fictions.

Agee could not really have thought he was facing a reading public that made no distinction between fiction and nonfiction. The concern was that *his* work, specifically, would be taken for an imaginative recreation. His apprehension, I will argue, comes not just from his awareness that his modernist tactics would draw *Famous Men* into the gravitational field of literary criticism but also from the fact that his approach—not just to representation but to the real as well—had a distinctly literary and aesthetic lineage. His attitude toward the families of Hobe's Hill, Alabama, was not one of liberal-humanist compassion but of reverence. Although years later Agee would profess to be a Christian "in the simplest and strictest senses of the word" (qtd. in Bergreen 289), the religious quality of *Famous Men* is not the Bible-bound sort but the "spilt religion" of romanticism.[6] It is a reverential stance that sees all of creation as sanctified and beautiful, indissolubly weds those two qualities, and makes the perception of them the defining capacity of poets and artists.

Borrowing the coinage of Thomas Carlyle, M. H. Abrams identified this strain of romanticism as "natural supernaturalism" and traced its manifestations in numerous British and German romantic writers, including among the former Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley.

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The sweep is broad, but these disparate figures form, Abrams argues, a definable "intellectual tendency" (11) marked by a conviction that paradise is "available on this earth, to each of us, as an ordinary possibility of every day" (27). The qualities of the supernatural become the hidden potential of the natural world; life itself becomes the "highest good"; the "norm of life is joy" in the sense that "joy is what man is born for . . . and it is both the precondition and the end of the highest art" (431). Agee's almost obsessive preoccupation with rendering actuality in *Famous Men* is in part an anxious response to the attenuated impact of overabundant images. But for him, actuality is not just the material fact of the real but its sanctity, as revealed by what might be called an epiphany of ontology or ontological epiphany—an ecstatic apprehension of the force and beauty of all that simply *is*. Of the night he and Evans spent on makeshift beds on the Gudger family's porch, Agee writes:

> All the length of the body and all its parts and functions were participating, and being realized and rewarded, inseparable from the mind, identical with it: and all, everything, that the mind touched, was actuality, and all, everything, that the mind touched turned immediately, yet without in the least losing the quality of its total individuality, into joy and truth, or rather, revealed, of its self, truth, which in its very nature was joy, which must be the end of art, of investigation, and of all anyhow human existence. (199)

This transport does not depend on extraordinary locations or circumstances, nor is it a visitation from above. Rather, it is

> possible at any junction of time, space and consciousness and just as (at least so far as we can know and be concerned) it is our consciousness alone, in the end, that we have to thank for joy, so too it is our consciousness alone that is defective when we fall short of it. (199)

Agee's reverential stance renders *Famous Men* vulnerable to charges of solipsism, as though the abject poverty he confronts is reduced to an occasion for his personal ecstasies. But there is an ethic in his reverence, albeit one that counters documentary representation's generally pragmatic motive. Although *Famous Men* contains passages of impressive jeremiad, Agee was viscerally opposed to the idea of producing a representation of

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the farmers' lives as a means toward the specific end of remedial action. Thus, commentary itself is a violation: "if you desire not only to present but to talk about what you present," he explains, "one of your first anxieties, in advance of failure foreseen, is to make clear that a sin is a sin" (210).[7] A representation of the farmers constructed as a means to an end, he feels, would devalue them. In using them instrumentally and as symbols of a general condition, it would subordinate their actual, autonomous existence and perpetuate if not exacerbate the condition that produces injustice and indifference in the first place: a deficient sense of the reality of other people. "Everything is most significant," Agee judges, "in proportion as it approaches in our perception, simultaneously, its own singular terms" (217). And the general effect of pictorial mass media, including social documentary, was arguably less a forceful impression of the reality of other lives than the creation of a virtual space in which images circulate without significantly impinging on daily life. The only ethical representation of the farmers, therefore, would be a record of their singularity, the only end of which would be to break through the haze of simulacra and drive into the reader's consciousness the actuality of their irreducible, unreplicable, individual human existences.

Thus Agee tries to present the families not as people singled out for representation because of their extreme destitution but as equal elements of a uniformly sacrosanct world, of a "universe of things which should be accepted and recorded for [their] own sake" (412). He wants us to know that the "one deeply exciting thing" about the farmer George Gudger "is that he is actual, he is living, at this instant" (205). His significance derives not from any story or argument that could be made about him, nor from any cause that his representation might further, but from the fact that he is "exactly, down to the last inch and instant, who, what, where, when and why he is . . . living, right now, in flesh and blood and breathing, in an actual part of the world." Nor is this insistence a rhetorical compensation for his social invisibility: "The same seems to me true of every item in the experience of which I am speaking, and I could say it with equal sincerity of conviction of all human experience." Everything in nature "is at least as considerably an image of absolute 'beauty' as the counterpoints of Bach," Agee continues, and everyone, "including artists," would do well "to recognize this fact . . . and to come as closely as they may be able, to recording and reproducing it for its own, not for art's sake" (206).

In bringing this faith to the documentary project Agee incurs at least

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two problems. First, the reverential stance is not an aesthetic theory per se, but the experience of beauty is integral to it, and it had been articulated most extensively by romantic writers who by Agee's time had been firmly installed in the literary tradition. These predecessors are a liability in part because Agee views that installation as a kind of textual living death. Once claimed for the literary domain, he fears, a text is sealed off as though it had "nothing to do with Life, or no more to do with it than is thoroughly convenient at a given time" (323–24). In echoing romantic convictions, *Famous Men* would invite the same fate. But Agee's trouble came less from romanticism's reception than from the romantic writers themselves, who typically saw their works not as exercises in representational fidelity but as acts of imagination—operations of the mind, deliberately transfiguring the world.

It is a truism that romanticism turned the offices of poetry toward lowly subjects formerly excluded by generic proprieties. But its poetics of the ordinary is not a mimetic imperative. Wordsworth advertised a new attention to "common life," but the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* does not present the poems as illuminations of the ordinary for its own sake. The "purpose" specifically ascribed to them is the revelation of fundamental features of human psychology: "to follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature" (241). Emerson maintains that "A squirrel leaping from bough to bough . . . fills the eye not less than a lion" ("Art" 188) and that the greatest poets "resemble a mirror carried through the street, ready to render an image of every created thing" ("Poet" 214). And yet the great distinction of poets is an active, symbol-making "imagination" that submits the created world to a "metamorphosis" (209). In the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass* Whitman speaks of himself as a medium for rendering forth the multifarious singularities of the world "without increase or diminution" (415) and promises that "What I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition. You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me" (418), but his mimetic passion is subordinated to creative vision: the poet "supplies what wants supplying and checks what wants checking"; he "sees the solid and beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms" (414). His later essays increasingly stress the visionary, transformative power of the poet rather than the mimetic function. A "new-founded literature" is "not merely to copy and reflect existing surfaces" ("Democratic Vistas" 463);

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the poet must "endow a literature with grand and archetypal models" (485).

In Agee we find the reverential stance divorced from imagination and wedded to a principle of mimetic fidelity. Imagination is an interference that he aims "to suspend or destroy" in order to reveal "a universe luminous, spacious, incalculably rich and wonderful in each detail" (9). When "all of consciousness is shifted from the imagined, the revisive, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is," then "the aspect of a street in sunlight can roar in the heart of itself as a symphony, perhaps as no symphony can." Emerson speaks of "the eternal picture that nature paints in the street" ("Art" 189); Agee wants that picture and nothing else: without imagination, without symbol, without archetype. For if the modernized world is suffering from an attenuated sense of reality—including, most grievously, that of other human beings—the symbolizing and universalizing aspects of romantic poetics are no better than those of meliorist social documentary that seek (or manufacture) the "average," making individuals embody general conditions or stand in for multitudes, eliding their integral, singular actuality in the process.[8]

The logic of Agee's reverential mimesis, however, is difficult. On one hand it does away with principles of selection: if "Everything that is is holy" (406), all that is deserves, even compels, the honor of representation. What diligence could produce, and what edifice contain, the representations of that "universe of things," as Agee has it, "which should be accepted and recorded for [their] own sake"? On the other hand, reverential mimesis produces an artifact that is condemned by its own scheme of value. If the glory is in the existence of the real thing itself, the representation of it must always be subordinate, inadequate, regretful of its own existence—never enough and always too much. Out of this fundamental bind *Famous Men* as a whole becomes what may be the most extended instance of adynaton in the history of letters—a communication wrenched out of a conviction of its own inevitable failure, protestations of which recur like a leitmotif. The "particularities, and matters ordinary and obvious" to which Agee devotes himself "are exactly themselves beyond designation of words" (88); the Gudgers' house in the morning "shines quietly forth such grandeur, such sorrowful holiness of its exactitudes in existence, as no human consciousness shall ever rightly perceive, far less impart to another" (117). For however skilled, a representation that "proves and asserts nothing but which exists" (204) can only fail in force and detail:

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"No matter how strong and vivid it may be, its strength and vividness are not of that order which, in the open air of our actual, personal living, we draw in every time we breathe" (212). Worse, representation may occlude the real. Even "the casual passages in our experience," Agee insists, "carry a value, joy, strength, validity, beauty, wholeness, radiance" that "the best art quite as powerfully as the worst manages . . . to distort, falsify, and even to obliterate." The sheer fact of existence, he proposes, "is one strong argument . . . against art of any sort" (204).[9]

The charge that art is derivative of and inferior to the real is of course perennial; equally so are the rebuttals, which usually downplay the mimetic dimension of art and stress either its edifying potential or its imaginative and expressive nature. Few modernists inclined toward the former option; some pursued the latter. Agee does, at one point, propose another characteristically modernist response, which saves art without subordinating reality. If the simple, incontrovertible *being* of everything that is remains the highest value, then one ought to subordinate both the mimetic and expressive aspects of artworks to their brute existence, placing them firmly in the world of things, proposing, in the much-quoted formulation of Archibald MacLeish's "Ars Poetica," that art "should not mean but be" (107). A man might, Agee suggests, "do art the simple but total honor of accepting and believing it in the terms in which he accepts and honors breathing, lovemaking, the look of a newspaper, and the street he walks through" (212). Considered thus, works of art might "advance and assist the human race" because "in a certain degree they create something which has never existed before . . . whereas the rest of the mind's activity is merely deductive, descriptive, acquisitive or contemplative" (205).

But Agee does not foresee such a reorientation in aesthetics. In fact, he declares it "simply impossible" (212), even for those who value art most highly. For the "deifying of the imagination" embedded in Western aesthetics corrupts artists and audiences alike. The former feel compelled "to select and invent," unaware that "the truth is more important than any pretty lie," and the latter cannot shake the idea that "art is a fiction." Unlike Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Roger Fry, and a number of other modernist aesthetic theorists, Agee is not concerned to liberate the aesthetic from the mimetic, but the reverse. For him it would be best if art was never understood as mimetic so that mimesis would never be mistaken for art.

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Vision and power

Agee's ideal mimesis, then, is an act of humility, subordinating the presumptions of the imagination to the exemplary exactitudes of the camera. His reverence for the real derives from romanticism, but where Wordsworth proposed a marriage of mind and nature, Agee insists on a divorce. With this revision of terms he undertakes a verbal mimesis (Reed calls it "empiricism with a vengeance" [162]) that fairly vindicates Georg Lukács's claim that modernism followed naturalism in destroying the "hierarchy of significance" essential to realism (34). But even shorn (at least theoretically) of imagination, Agee's devotional mimesis is nonetheless inseparable from his sense of beauty, and in this aesthetic experience he unhappily confronts again the power he was trying to cast off.

For the project of stripping imagination from representation Agee declares the camera "the central instrument of our time" (9). It holds out the promise of pure denotation, whereas the writer is prone to falsify the real "through inaccuracy of meaning as well as inaccuracy of emotion," and his poor instrument, moreover, is hopelessly sequential, unable to "communicate simultaneity with any immediacy" (209).

Nonetheless Agee resolves to exploit what mimetic power words do possess, hoping "to make a number of physical entities as plain and vivid as possible" (97). "Words can never embody, they can only describe," but they can succeed within their own limitations if the describer is "more rather than less shameless," proceeding "without either distortion or apology" (211). Parts of *Famous Men* are exercises in just such shamelessness. Since the Gudger house is "so entirely static a subject," Agee notes before embarking on a description of it, "it may be slow going. That is as it may be" (118): a warning but not an apology for the 43 pages to follow. Agee does clearly indicate the wretched inadequacy of all of the families' houses as shelters, implicitly indicting the society that permits them. But he approaches them more with reverence than with judgment, making the process of inspection more an act of humility than of power. His descriptions are in large part devoted to rendering the "intrinsic beauty and stature" that inheres in these "plain objects and atmospheres" (211). The cheap pine boards of the Gudgers' house display fabulously intricate "wild fugues and floods of grain" (128); they stand "more naked and noble than sternest Doric, more rich and more variant than watered silk" (125). Agee responds to the composition of tenant rooms as though they were gallery installations: "Up by the right of the fireplace, and not

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balanced on the other side, is a wide vertical board, creating between its structural dominance and the centrality of the fireplace a not wide yet sharp dilemma of symmetries" (151).

Lest such reverence be construed as condescension, Agee reminds us again that the intensity of being he records is not a species of the picturesque, unique to the farmers' things by virtue of their poverty, but a quality inhering in *all* things. In any house at all "it is possible, by sufficient quiet and passive concentration, to realize . . . the simultaneity in existence of all of its rooms in their exact structures and mutual relationship in space and in all they contain" (161). The multiple but integrated parts can "*be, at once,* driven upon your consciousness" with "such an annihilating counterpoint as might be if you could within an instant hear and be every part, from end to end, of the most vastly spun of fugues" (162; Agee's emphasis).

For every rhapsodic description of wood grain there is a blunt notation of some aspect of dire material poverty, such as the dreadful condition of all the families' too-few beds and the lack of electricity, plumbing, and toilets. Agee's conviction of the "dignity of actuality" (216) does not blind him to the gross indignities of it, but his reverential stance is not at all undermined by the presence of squalor and hardship. He denounces the bromide that the farmers are inured to their suffering; he suggests that only revolution could begin to amend their conditions. And yet he concludes the book not with a summary statement of condemnation or an image that embodies the general injustice but with a vignette that reprises his other major theme—the force, beauty, magnitude, and mystery of being, of which this pocket of rural Alabama is one part.

Famous Men concludes with an account of an epiphanic moment Agee shared with Evans the night they spent on the Gudgers' porch. As they lay in silence, the dense texture of night sounds was pierced by one clear, sharp, patterned animal cry, then another, and there unfolded the uncannily expressive, elaborate, and musical communication of two foxes somewhere in the darkness. The calls were "a work of great, private and unambitious art which was irrelevant to audience" (412); he felt "the frightening joy of hearing the world talk to itself" (414). Though perfect mimesis is "beyond possibility," the reverential effort toward it is affirmed. He and Evans lay "thinking, analysing, remembering, in the human and artist's sense praying" over the sensations and memories of the preceding days, which "had in that time the extreme clearness, and edge, and honor," which, he concludes, "I shall now try to give you" (416).

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Ten years later, in an introduction to a collection of Helen Levitt's photographs, Agee reiterates and elaborates his reverential stance (as well as his conception of photography as not an art per se but a means of showing forth the artistry of being). Levitt's photographs of Harlem street life, he writes, reveal "how constantly the unimagined world is in its own terms an artist" (xii): "Surreptitiously, unknown even to the performers, though in broad daylight, human beings and their streets continually evolve some of their most unutterable meanings, as a dance." Great photography, he proposes, can foster "a purification of the sense of sight" that will help us perceive the artistry of "the ordinary world," and that might even "do much in restoring us towards sanity, goodwill, calm, acceptance, and joy" (xv).

But if Agee's reverential stance is not defeated by the deprivation and suffering he witnessed, it is nonetheless seriously compromised in another way. He would likely agree with Emerson that "even the corpse hath its own beauty" ("Nature" 8), but not with Wordsworth that the experience of beauty and joy "cleaves to us as a necessary part of our existence, our natural and unalienable inheritance" (253). Such experience, he affirms, is the highest human capacity, but he sees that, like freedom, it is all too alienable. He finds surpassing beauty in the farmers, their houses, fields, and the land of the region, but among the families themselves, no evident perception of it. Their indifference, it appears, is a result of the fact that every aspect of their relationship to their environment is controlled by the "plain and powerful terms of need" (276). "The 'sense of beauty,'" he is compelled to conclude, "like nearly everything else, is a class privilege" (277).

Famous Men is fraught with Agee's pained knowledge that his observation of the tenants' lives is also, inescapably, an act of domination. One compensatory strategy he and Evans both use is to register the force with which some of their subjects looked back. As most commentators have explained, Evans allowed his subjects to prepare themselves and face the camera squarely; the viewers' gaze is returned by eyes that are knowing, guarded, and sometimes disconcertingly penetrating. Rabinowitz notes in particular Agee's account of being fixed by the unabashed stare of the ten-year-old Louise Gudger. But while attentive to his subjects' resistance and reciprocal inspection, he remains aware that whatever agency they exert in the actual encounter, the power to represent it is his alone. And he is even more distressed over a second ineliminable inequality, which is

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that while his subjects can, to some extent, look as he looks, he is quite certain they cannot see as he sees. Whatever they glean from their scrutiny of him and Evans, he knows it is unlikely to be an experience of these strange men's "intrinsic beauty and stature."

There is, therefore, an intractable ethical problem with reverential mimesis in this context: even if it could be executed with perfection, it would simply install the reader more precisely in the documentarian's position of privilege and power. It would eliminate the communicative breach between the documentarian and his audience but not the experiential gulf between them and his human subjects. Agee punctuates *Famous Men* with some rather disconcerting personal divulgences—of his sexual desires, for instance, and his suicidal impulses. Sympathetic critics read them as part of his attempt to level the imbalance of power: as he invades his subjects' privacy and exposes their humiliations, so he bares to his audience his own selfishness, vanity, despair, raw lust, and abject need. But there is a further step he takes to collapse the space between his subjects, himself, and his audience, one that is a radical extension of that posture of vulnerability and also a reversal of his strategy of mimetic force. One of Agee's most pervasive rhetorical patterns is a rapid shifting from the minute particular to progressively broader views—regional, national, planetary, and finally cosmic—so that humanity is contracted to the single point of an anomalous and precarious life form. With this shifting Agee abandons the attempt at mimetic exactitude. The power—and pleasure—of visual apprehension is countered by an exercise of the conceptual imagination that situates the event of human consciousness in the universe that overwhelms it.

Forty pages into *Famous Men* we encounter the section titled Part One. Without frame or context, Agee delivers a description nearly two pages in length of a single kerosene lamp. Detailing shape, color, and construction, he moves steadily inward to the "stout-weft strap of wick" that draws the oil "through a little slotted smile of golden tin" into the flue and the flame (45). But from this intense focus we are reeled rapidly outward to the nothingness that stretches from the roof overhead "straight to the terrific stars . . . of whom the nearest is so wild a reach my substance wilts to think on." Within this vastness the clinging of human families around little lights the world over appears a single attitude of self-protection on the part of countless "incommunicably tender" lives "sustaining, for a while, without defense, the enormous assaults of the universe" (51).

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In his "shameless" description of the Gudgers' house Agee goes on his knees to inspect even the dimensions and detritus of the crawl space beneath it. "The rear edges of the house rest in part on stacked stones, in part on the dirt; in part they overhang this dirt," he begins (130). But he breaks off abruptly from measurement ("the forward parts of the house are about two and a half feet off the ground") to the long view of geological time. His observation that the patch of earth beneath the house has been protected from the elements pitches us into an inhuman perspective: "At a bright time in the sun, and in a sudden alienness to those rhythms the land had known these hundred million years" a handful of humans appeared and erected the little shelter. "For the space of a number of seasons [the house] shall hold this shape of earth denatured"; yet in the unimaginably long existence of the earth, it "shall have passed soft and casually as a snowflake fallen on black spring ground, which thaws in touching."

Every retreat outward from the immediate and the regional encompasses again the urban readers, folding them into an image of human life as a single and fragile phenomenon, incidental to the processes of the natural world within which "by chance we live" (223). In these sweeps the human scale is lost, collapsing, at least momentarily, the geographical and social distance between Agee's "undefended and appallingly damaged" (5) subjects and the readers to whom he is exposing them. We would do well, he proposes, to consider

> whether there is anything more marvellous or more valuable in the state of being we distinguish as "life" than in the state of being of a stone, the brainless energy of a star, the diffuse existence of space . . . we should realize that life and consciousness are only the special crutches of the living and the conscious, and that in setting as we do so high a value by them, we are in a certain degree making a virtue of necessity; are being provincial; are pleading a local cause. (200)

The broadly outlined cosmological truth that Agee invokes is of course hardly more available to his subjects than that of his ontological epiphanies. Tellingly, he includes Fred Ricketts's triumphant account of his argument with his schoolteacher's lesson that the earth turns on an axle: "well wasn't hell supposed to be under the earth, and if it was wouldn't they be all the time trying to chop the axle post out from

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under the earth? . . . Teacher never did bring up nothn bout no axles after that" (268). But cosmology at least engenders not aesthetic transport but a chastening humility. Rabinowitz argues that *Famous Men,* no less than other social documentaries, bears out Freud's contention that scopophilia, epistemophilia, and sadism are closely linked (39)—and in many respects it does. But the understanding of time and space to which Agee intermittently appeals is a kind of knowing that to a degree resists domination by resisting scopophilia in both its social-documentary and romantic-aesthetic forms. His abrupt shifts to the cosmic perspective not only close human distances but also undermine the domination of the gaze by asserting another actuality, one that no eye can encompass and no mind can fully comprehend.

Parts and wholes

The reverential stance does not, in theory, privilege the natural world. Emerson generously extended the vision of sanctity to the productions of industry and technology. The new art he prophesies will "find beauty and holiness in new and necessary facts," not least "the shop and mill . . . the railroad, the insurance office, the joint-stock company . . . the galvanic battery, the electric jar, the prism, and the chemist's retort" ("Art" 194). Agee repeats the gesture, suggesting that the products of industry too have "an inevitability and perfection which art as such can only approach" (206). The ontological epiphany is not essentially attached to the rural scene, and indeed his catalogue of phenomena that can trigger it is primarily urban and industrial: "the fracture of sunlight on the façade and traffic of a street; the sleaving up of chimney smoke; the rich lifting of the voice of a train along the darkness" and so forth—down to the smell of "a car's exhaust" (200).

Emerson sanctifies industry and commerce, however, not by demoting nature but by expanding it. Nature is conceived as a living whole composed of harmoniously integrated parts, including those produced by modernity: "a steamboat bridging the Atlantic between Old and New England, and arriving at its ports with the punctuality of a planet, is a step of man into harmony with nature"; the poet sees "the factory-village, and the railway . . . fall within the great Order not less than the bee-hive, or the spider's geometrical web" ("Poet" 204). That order is benevolent, and humanity belongs to it: "all the parts [of nature] incessantly work into

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each other's hands for the profit of man" ("Nature" 7) and "a virtuous man is in unison with her works" (11).

Likewise, though Agee insists on the ontological equality of all natural and manufactured things (he subordinates only poor art), it is deep in rural Alabama that epiphany comes with such force that he and Evans could not "for an instant have escaped it, even if we had wished to" (201). And while he sees himself as a rootless, alienated urbanite, he sees the families as deeply embedded, virtually organic components of the regional ecology. The pastoral in *Famous Men,* however, repeatedly turns dystopic: organic vitality is subject to disease and degeneration, and the families' intimate interconnection with the natural world becomes the measure of their cruel constraint. For those laboring to survive, the dynamic, self-sustaining system of the natural world becomes a structure of merciless subjugation.

Agee recurrently imagines the farm family as itself an organism—not even animal but plant, not just inhabiting but rooted in the land. The Gudgers first appear among "the branched tribes of living in earth and air and water" and their sleep is like "the effortless nursing of ignorant plants; entirely silenced . . . mured in night" (17–18). Emma Woods, unhappily separated from her family by her marriage, is a vine that "spends swiftly out on the vast blank wall of the earth . . . feeling its way, to fix, and anchor, so far, so wide, of the strong and stationed stalk" (61). Likewise the smooth course of the morning routine: "the breakfasts ended, the houses are broken open like pods in the increase of the sun, and they are scattered on the wind of a day's work" (81). The trope is extended from the family itself to their house and land: the surrounding fields "are as the spread and broken petals of a flower whose bisexual center is the house" (112); "The fields are organic of the whole, and of their own nature, and of the work that is poured into them: the spring, the garden, the outbuildings, are organic to the house itself" (113).

But the families are not integrated into a circuit of vitality; they are snared in a system that depletes them. At sunrise "birds are drawn sparkling and each plant erects upon his root, lifts up his head, accepts once more the summer," and the farming families too "shall be drawn up like plants" (74). The compulsion may be similar, but the experience is not: they wake "with the burden of being upon them, their legs heavy, their eyes quiet and sick . . . there is no use, no help for it . . . [they] are drawn loose from their homes a million upon the land, beneath the quietly lifted

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light, to work" (75). The image of the Gudgers' house and fields as an organic unity is followed by a startling revision in which it appears as "the wrung breast of one human family's need . . . yielding blood and serum in its thin blue milk, and the house, the concentration of living and taking, is the cracked nipple" (113). The benevolent body of nature is drained and barely able to sustain its dependents. Similarly, a surreal but still organic image of the family members as the lobes of a single brain resting in the skull of the house is reprised, in one of Agee's extraordinary conceits, as an image of life woefully stunted. The threadbare lawn of the Gudgers' house is "intricately . . . trenched and seamed with sleavings of rain; as if, the skull lifted off, the brain were exposed, of some aged not intellectual being who had lived a long time patiently and with difficulty" (123).

In a passage recalling Whitman's "urge and urge and urge / always the procreant urge of the world" ("Song of Myself" 26) Agee represents the cycles of human reproduction as coextensive with the unceasing natural rhythms of the planet:

> a man and a woman are drawn together upon a bed and there is a child and there are children: . . . then they are drawn away, and become mothers and fathers of children, who shall become mothers and fathers of children: . . . Moreover, these flexions are taking place every where, like a simultaneous motion of all the waves of the water of the world . . . this is the weaving of human living: of whose fabric each individual is a part. (50)

But the Whitmanian vitality is collapsed into an image of hereditary degeneration by Agee's abrupt reversion to the more immediate origins of his subjects: "a chain and weaving, a texture of sorrowful and demented flesh," producing generation after generation of men "wrungout in work to lassitude in the strong sun and to lack of hope and caring . . . the germens they carry at the groins strained, cracked, split, tainted, vitiate to begin with" (90).[10]

Thus Agee's sometimes idealized images of the families' embeddedness in an "elaborate texture" (187) of interdependent human, plant, and animal existences are countered by others that present that interrelation as an injurious and dehumanizing subjugation. It is possible to see the tenant families' connectedness to nature as a travesty of pastoral harmony, capitalism's ugly disfiguration of a naturally beneficent relationship—for the tenants are indeed as enmeshed in an economic system as they are

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in a natural one. But although he condemns the ruinous, greed-driven system that half-starves the families and exhausts the soil, Agee does not at any point appeal to the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal. Rather, he represents the micro and macro structures of what he calls the "criminal" global economy in distinctly agrarian imagery, suggesting that social organization is pernicious precisely insofar as it resembles the organic integration of parts into a functional whole.

"To talk as if tenantry as such were responsible" for the wretched condition of the farmers, he declares, "is dishonest or ridiculous . . . the economic source is nothing but the whole world-system of which tenantry is one modification" (181–82). He chronicles the families' painful toil to pick the 1400 pounds of cotton that is the unit of sale, the trek to the town, and the lineup at the gin, below "the deafening appetites of its metals" (306). Of the last stage of the journey, the slow procession back to the farms, he writes, "It is as if those who were drawn in full by the sun and their own effort and sucked dry at a metal heart were restored, were sown once more at large upon the slow breadths of their country, in the precisions of some mechanic and superhuman hand" (307). The people are grown, gathered, and processed, their seeds extracted to be sown, to start the cycle again. This surreal conflation of socioeconomic organization and organic process recasts functional integration of either sort as a nightmarish, dehumanizing exploitation.

But it is not only the desperately impoverished farmers who are subject to helpless enmeshment with the natural world. So too, through the inescapable biology of the body, are such urban sophisticates as Agee himself and his readers, who must not be allowed to feel themselves qualitatively different and safely apart from the subjects of the book. This is the point, it seems to me, of a long and apparently self-indulgent digression in the book's final pages. Agee's account of the calling foxes shifts abruptly into a reflection on the initial ecstasy of erotic passion. That "delicate stage of love," he suggests, is virtually godlike because "so unassailably beyond any meaning of tenderness and trust . . . [so] distended with incredulous joy" (413). But the "arrest and preservation" (415) of that experience is impossible: the incandescent moment must be lost, and "not all the kind regard nor all the love within the scope of existence will ever restore you what for a while, and only that you might lose it in the blind service of nature, you had" (414). The transport of passion drives reproduction and, having served its purpose, expires. There is a sense in which "the procreant

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urge of the world" is a form of subjugation from which no one is free.

Thus the ontological epiphany, bound up with the perception of beauty, appears as the highest experience of consciousness—distinct from and above the intense but biological and moribund transport of erotic love. And though Agee does some colorful cursing of his own "futile and bottomless, botched and overcomplicated" intelligence (7), he explicitly declines to construe the tenants' relative simplicity as in any way a kind of purity or grace. For the conditions that keep them "profoundly members in nature" also keep them "little if at all more aware of 'beauty' than any other member in nature, any animal, anyhow" (277). And to be deprived of that human potential, along with "pleasure, and joy, and love . . . is to be deprived almost of existence itself" (278).

Organicism and art

Agee's recoil from the ideal of functional integration is also manifest in the formal construction of *Famous Men*. In his preamble he accepts the idea that the definitive trait of a work of art is the harmonious integration of parts and explicitly abandons any such aspiration to wholeness. "No doubt," he writes, "I . . . shall seriously distress myself over my inability to create an organic, mutually sustaining and dependent, and as it were musical form" (8). In fact, he goes on to distress himself over many things, but not that. The disclaimer is almost immediately countered by his assertion that only by abandoning the closed form of art for deliberately "non-'artistic'" terms might it be possible to achieve his aim—to convey the ontological epiphany, to open "before consciousness, and within it, a universe luminous, spacious, incalculably rich and wonderful in each detail" (9). "I am in this piece of work illimitably more interested in life than in art" he reminds us later, and so "shall take my time over what may seem to be nonessentials, exactly as seems best" (214).

The "nonessentials"—the minutiae, digressions, nonsequiturs, pastiched materials, quotations, autocommentaries, shifting tones and styles—comprise an assault on wholeness, a shattering of form calculated to land *Famous Men* safely beyond the walls of art. The book nonetheless shares the ironic liability of so many agonistic modernist works in its susceptibility to being cast as evidence of a nefarious cult of form. Peter Cosgrove has introduced *Famous Men* as a work whose "aesthetic intentions derive from the modernist ideals of formal values" (329), and he suggests that

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readers and critics alike have seen Evans's photographs and Agee's text as together forming an "aesthetic unity." More recently, Janet Galligani Casey allows that *Famous Men* "bridges the exaggerated gap between the modernist project and the [politically] radical one" (42), but adds that "If *Famous Men* seems to evade its own ostensible subject . . . it is perhaps because matters of representation were, on the whole, more important to Agee than the individuals or events through which he explored them." She concludes that both *Famous Men* and Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*, to which she compares it, "end with rhetorical gestures that return us to the beginning, underscoring their hermeticism and appearing to trap the reader in their authors' discursive universes" (48).

Agee attempted to send *Famous Men* into the world fully armed against being received as a work of art—on one hand by a mandarin criticism governed by "a gentleman's agreement" (323) regarding how seriously to take the propositional content of a text and on the other by the equally defusive effect of a post-Duchamp avant-garde in which virtually anything could be proffered and received as art, particularly if it appeared to repudiate the aesthetic. Agee's awareness of the relative futility of his defense against the latter is evident in a rather bitter reproach in his preamble. If he could, he writes, he would dispense entirely with textual representation and offer instead "fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement" (10). But even such an attempt to assault his audience with the full force of experience, he surmises, would be lost: "Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game."

But Agee's desire to evade the art world's withering touch is part of a larger struggle. The antiaesthetic fervor of *Famous Men,* like that of a number of modernist works, is a kind of claustrophobic response to the increasing specialization and scientization of the disciplines of knowledge, the creeping land-enclosure of intellectual terrain. As the so-called human sciences staked their professional claims and jostled for authority, literature and art were shifted out to the murky borderlands of the merely subjective. The earliest attempt to resist such displacement and demotion by transcending boundaries entirely is perhaps Wordsworth's. The claim that poetry deals with universals is of course ancient, but Wordsworth presents it specifically as *restored* wholeness, over against a plethora of empiricist

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specializations. The "object" of poetry, he writes, "is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony" (251). The poet appeals to the reader "not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer or a natural philosopher, but as a Man" (252). In *Famous Men* we find a proportionally intensified desire for a mode of communication that overarches disciplinary fragmentation—and aesthetic ghettoization—in the name of the wholly human. Their subject is human being, and therefore, Agee explains, he and Evans attempt "to deal with it not as journalists, sociologists, politicians, entertainers, humanitarians, priests, or artists, but seriously" (xi). He does not claim success, but he allows himself to imagine that he may be laying the ground for a new mode of comprehension and communication that would be not art as currently understood but "an art and a way of seeing existence based, let us say, on an intersection of astronomical physics, geology, biology, and (including psychology) anthropology, known and spoken of not in scientific but in human terms" (216). The only wholeness Agee desires is on the level of discourse. And it just might, he hopes, be attained by destroying wholeness on the level of form.

The history of the avant-garde in the twentieth century suggests that the rubric *art* became the clearing house for forms of communication that belonged to no recognizable discipline, and therefore that every attempt to break out of art, including displays of the materials Agee had half a mind to throw at us—from the scraps and clods right down to the excrement—just extended the confines by another few feet. But if Agee is one of the modernists most distressed about discursive containment, the fate of *Famous Men* makes him one who had least cause to be. Although the back cover of the 2001 printing advertises its contents as "a watershed literary event" and a "poetic tract of its time," it also promises "an unsparing record of place," and its publisher now classifies it as history (an earlier edition was classified as sociology). However unsuitable the disciplinary label, the text is at least partly spared the dreaded imaginative airs of literature.

A number of critics have observed the irony in *Famous Men*'s promotion to "classic" status. Even used nongenerically (not a "literary classic," just a "classic"), it does seem perverse in light of Agee's blistering opening offensive against those who proffer such valuations. "The deadliest blow the enemy of the human soul can strike is to do fury honor," he declares,

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adding: "Official acceptance is the one unmistakable symptom that salvation is beaten again, and is the one surest sign of fatal misunderstanding, and is the kiss of Judas" (12). And yet the central place of modernist texts in departments of English between the first publication of *Famous Men* in 1941 and its reissue in 1960 could only have helped to create the readership the work then readily found—which included civil rights activists whom Agee even at his most despairing could not fault for moral lassitude. We have yet to see a university Department of Human Terms, but *Famous Men* turns up quite regularly in programs and courses that counter disciplinary constraints—American studies, media studies, and agrarian studies, to name just a few. And departments of English, whose branding iron Agee feared, are considerably less interested than they once were in self-sustaining forms that have "nothing to do with Life."[11]

That *Famous Men* has endured and lent itself so widely, however, would not likely afford Agee much satisfaction. Although he declares that "words can never embody, they can only describe" (211), by his own terms what would count as success, or at least as something more than failure, for the project that was "a *book* only by necessity" (xi), would be to have brought the full force of reality to language, to have induced in every reader a virtually unmediated replication of his own experience and conviction. The idea that such an ideal communication could be achieved through a calculated revolution in verbal technique and textual form places Agee quite squarely in modernist territory. The book's form is shattered in the name of a seamless continuity of experience, language, and comprehension that to postmodern thought can only appear as another manifestation of the protean will to totality—dangerous at worst, and in any case undesirable.

But if on the level of theory Agee's ideal communication retains roughly the plausibility (and less than the appeal) of alchemy, in documentary practice the representational problems he was responding to must be faced anew with every project. Those who cannot effectively represent themselves remain, and those who undertake to represent them must still enter into a contest with our generally robust psychic defences against suffering too awful to contemplate and remote enough to forget. And the dominant strategy of such communications, from direct-mail charity appeals to feature-length films, is, like Agee's, the invocation not of principle but of pathos: to try to make felt, through the haze of pictorial media, the singular reality and equal claim of distant human lives. For

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the documentarian with an aim more pragmatic than Agee would allow or hope for, *Famous Men* may yet have something to teach. In a media environment vastly more crowded and competitive than Agee faced, and in which the temptation to resort to shock is commensurately stronger, *Famous Men* is a worthwhile reminder that the visual exposure and display of abjection inevitably reinforces, at least initially, the power imbalance it wishes to mitigate. Agee's attempt to convert the domination of the gaze into the humility of reverential vision, with its premise of universal beauty and sanctity, may have little place in activist documentary practice. But his reverential spirit, as I have argued, is modernist not just in its desire for wholeness but in its understanding of itself as a "class privilege" (277), fundamentally dependent on a basic level of material security. This does not reduce aesthetic apprehension to a fatuous indulgence of the well-fed; rather, in continuing to value it supremely, Agee makes it part of the case for economic justice. And in this respect *Famous Men*'s insistent materialism is at least as important a precedent for contemporary documentary as is its self-reflexivity, for it serves to remind audiences not just of their relative power but of their equal vulnerability and equal dependence on material security to hold them free of an existence wholly governed by organic compulsion and necessity.

Notes

1. I follow William Stott in using the term *social documentary* to distinguish from the mass of nonfictional records those that combine factuality with feeling and, more specifically, address themselves to human struggles in particular social and historical conditions. Paula Rabinowitz uses the term *political documentary* to designate the same practice, characterized by "advocacy rather than objectivity," "appeal to emotion," and the aim to "induce feeling, thought, and action" (7–8).

2. The imperative statement (from which Paula Rabinowitz takes the title of her book) is Karl Marx's conclusion regarding the smallholding French peasantry: "They cannot represent themselves. They must be represented" (Marx 318).

3. Stott cites Alfred Kazin's description of the book as "an attack on the facile mechanism . . . of most documentary," and elaborates at least nine distinct ways in which Agee "subverted the genre" (290–92).

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4. Alan Spiegel follows the same pattern as Reed and Williams: he identifies a number of modernist techniques—*and* a nostalgic undercurrent—but aligns the text with postmodernism nonetheless. Agee's understanding of "the 'autonomy' of the word," he argues, was mainly "a source of pining and frustration, a desert isle of linguistic quarantine where reality's castaways burned in vain for a lost but never-to-be-forgotten Eden of being, truth, and 'radiance'" (58). But he concludes that this marks Agee as "the definitive wallflower at the postmodernist party to which he was doubtless invited, and may in part have even hosted, before anyone else." Rabinowitz cites both Miles Orvell's claim for the text's modernism (Orvell 272) and Reed's designation "postmodernist realism" but declines to mediate, noting simply that since its republication in 1960 the text "has assumed the status of a 'masterpiece' of modernist or postmodernist realism" (Rabinowitz 53).

5. Stott argues that documentary emerged as a distinct genre after World War I. Understood as "not fiction but fiction's opposite" (xi), it became "the primary expression of thirties America" (4).

6. The phrase is T. E. Hulme's (118).

7. Agee is sure of the human causes of the farmers' wretched conditions but equally sure that organized intervention, as an exercise of power, would be accompanied by error and abuse. Though allied with communism in theory, he distrusts its human agents, who fail to see that pride can be just as destructive to the human good as "the most total power of 'Greed'" (220) and who wind up dominated by the "dangerous and hideous persons" who "own and will always betray all revolutions" (276).

8. Agee and Evans were directed to produce a record of "the daily living and environment of an average white family of tenant farmers" (ix); Agee treats the descriptor as an insult.

9. With Agee as with Emerson, Whitman, and others sometimes inclined to denigrate art and exalt the real, the transaction is often actually a sort of transfer of essence: the supreme instances of art are discovered to reside not in any text or artifact but in the real things to which those contrivances are subordinate. As Whitman declares that the teeming life of the nation is "unrhymed poetry" (Preface 412) and "the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (411), so Agee imagines that Mrs. Gudger as a bride "was such a poem as no human being shall touch" (255) and avers that "the partition wall of the Gudgers' front bedroom *IS* importantly, among other things, a great tragic poem" (207).

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10. The rhetoric here carries disturbing overtones of the discourse of eugenics, particularly as theories of hereditary degeneration in intelligence and character were applied with special fervor to the rural poor. It is uncharacteristic of Agee, who elsewhere remarks on the intelligence of Louise Gudger and some of the others, and asserts that the tenant class does not produce more people "incapable of learning" than other classes do and the majority "are born with 'intelligences' potentially as open and 'healthful,' and as varied in pattern and charge, as any on earth" (269–70).

11. The gravest risk *Famous Men* ran was not literary critical interest, or even indifference, but sheer inattentiveness. For that, rather than "official acceptance" per se, would seem to be the only explanation for the entry *Famous Men* has been awarded in the *Oxford Companion to American Literature:*

> Nonfictional work by James Agee with photography by Walker Evans . . . the collaborators could not relate their subject in a conventional journalistic fashion. Instead they converted and expanded their assignment . . . to reveal the way of life and the personalities of the members of three families in warm, personal terms. (422)

No disciplinary framework can be held responsible for converting searing anger, abject confessional, desperate reverence, prostration, and ecstasy into "warm, personal terms." It seems more probable that the composer of the entry simply had not read the book; for Agee's sake, at any rate, it is preferable to think so.

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Desire's Second Act: "Race" and *The Great Gatsby*'s Cynical Americanism

Benjamin Schreier

> I once thought that there were no second acts in American lives.
> —Fitzgerald, "My Lost City" (31)

Few books have suffered Americanism's presumptions more unremittingly than has *The Great Gatsby*. This has again become apparent in the recent outpouring of work that draws attention to dynamics of racialization in the novel—to how Fitzgerald's book engages discourses that render racial and ethnic difference recognizable, including how certain characters are made to bear distinguishing racial or ethnic markers. By highlighting the novel's interest in race and its role in the development of discourses that continue to administer the recognition of race and ethnicity in America, this new criticism—most appearing in the last 10 years or so—purports to rescue *The Great Gatsby* from the sentimental attractions of a universalized, imperial American identity. Like the scholarship it claims to challenge, however, this new criticism reveals the enduring hold of the Americanist romance and its confidence that the novel offers a straightforward description of something called "America" or "American" identity. In its attention to representations of raced difference in the novel, much of this new work—as represented by such critics as Michaels, Goldsmith, Thompson, Washington, and Nies—is enabled by an assumption that practices and signs *already* bear racial meaning. This scholarship thus often ends up reifying a variety of presumably characteristic raced American identities in place of a presumably characteristic unraced (if

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surreptitiously white) one, reinforcing the very formations whose genealogy it purportedly seeks to unearth. Thus this essentially statist inquiry into American literature and culture presumes, as it is administered by, the self-evidence of "American" history and identity. Foucault, we should remember, indicted just such rightist thinking in *Discipline and Punish*, where he warned against "writing a history of the past in terms of the present" (31). In this essay I show how *The Great Gatsby* resists precisely the recognizant expectation upon which historicism, especially in the guise of an analysis of the novel's interest in racialization, is based, and how in doing this it points toward the possibility of a more open and critical form of reading.

By repeating the primal error of assuming coherence between text and nationalized—and racialized—symbolic order, of seeking the national in the individual, recent criticism overlooks the irreducible complexity of the novel's attention to identity and betrays a desire to buttress the ideological coherence of "America" as that entity is currently understood. One reason for the enduring critical fascination with the novel's rendering of American selves, to be sure, is that *The Great Gatsby* is intimately engaged with tropes of identity. But the narrative structure of this engagement, ever suspicious of the sentimental enticements of recognition, precludes taking "American" identity—even racialized or ethnicized American identity—for granted. Despite more than two-thirds of a century of criticism portraying *The Great Gatsby* as the avatar of the American novel,[1] the manner in which the novel is thought to represent America continues to be taken for granted, relying on the same assumptions about identity that drive the "romantic speculation" about origins to which Gatsby himself endlessly gives rise (48): unswerving attention to the significance of "Gatsby"—both in the text and in its criticism, either as an unmarked typical American or as an index to the hold of discourses that encode race and ethnicity—precludes focus on the presumption that he means anything at all.

If the desire to read American history into *The Great Gatsby* ends up locating in the novel particular racial or ethnic representations of American identity, in doing this it also illuminates the book's cynical relationship to the representational enticements of a nationally encoded identity: the irreducible complexity of the novel's attention to identity—its narrativization of a longing for precisely the kind of stable identity that Americanist criticism has so consistently found in it—in fact challenges the instru-

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mentalist critical tendency to anchor interpretation of the novel in the recognizability of "America." Notably, the novel is deeply troubled about the positivism underlying what Nick calls Gatsby's "appalling sentimentality" (118), remaining ambivalent about both what Gatsby has done with the sentimental category of "America" and how Nick responds to it, and illustrating a longing for the imaginative and ideological matrix out of which this sentimentality arises. This book enacts a deeply problematical drama of identification whereby the representational capacity of identity—ultimately *American* identity—is an object alternatively of desire and skepticism. Interpreted through Nick's insecure skepticism rather than through Gatsby's deluded optimism—and therefore through doubt about identity's ability to signify rather than through faith in its representational promise—the novel ultimately lacks faith in the symbolic orders on which stable conceptions of identity rely. When read for its narrative production of this cynicism rather than for its construction of raced American identities that we already know how to recognize, *The Great Gatsby* offers a means to liberate criticism of American literature from the straitjacket of an increasingly racialized Americanism.

The Great Gatsby and American identity

In order to show what is at stake—and especially what is lost—in reading the novel in terms of identities that can already be recognized, I start with an examination of how *Gatsby* has recently been read for race. This new scholarship falls into the historicist habit of relying on recognition as the final warrant of legitimacy. Looking for the national present in the literary past, it takes as self-evident the very racial and ethnic differences—along with the behaviors that, according to racialist logic, constitute those differences—that it presumably wants to challenge. Thus this criticism, which seeks to uncover racial particularities elided in an existential fantasy of universalized American identity, remains constrained by a positivist national fantasy that particular identities can reliably be recognized.

With *Our America*, Walter Benn Michaels is probably the most visible recent critic to pay close attention to *The Great Gatsby*'s engagement with race and ethnicity. In arguing generally for a "structural intimacy between nativism and modernism" (2)—for a link between modernism's "fantasy about the sign" as material and self-sufficient and nativism's fantasy about identity as inherited, racial, and determinative of beliefs and practices—

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and more polemically that "the great American modernist texts of the '20s must be understood as deeply committed to the nativist project of racializing the American" (13), Michaels rereads *The Great Gatsby* as an anxious meditation on racial identity. Michaels is most interested in characters—in particular, Gatsby and how other characters think about him. At root, Michaels suggests that Gatsby functions in the book as a figure of the threat of racial admixture. As the text's most transparent register of xenophobic concern, Tom is most overtly sensitive to this threat: "For Tom . . . Gatsby (né Gatz, with his Wolfsheim 'gonnegtion') isn't quite white" (25). Thus Michaels cites the confrontation at the Plaza, where Tom begins by mocking Gatsby's lack of origins—"Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" (*Gatsby* 137)—and "ends by predicting 'intermarriage between black and white'" (Michaels 25), as evidence of how the text evinces anxiety about the danger of inherited racial difference. Indeed, Tom isn't the text's only racist in Michaels's account: Nick also seems to think Gatsby wants to defile Daisy's—and nativist white America's—racial purity. Nick understands Gatsby's love for Daisy as "the following of a grail. [Gatsby] knew that Daisy was extraordinary, but he didn't realize just how extraordinary a 'nice' girl could be" (25). Michaels argues:

> "Nice" here doesn't exactly mean "white," but it doesn't exactly not mean "white" either. It is a term . . . that will serve as a kind of switching point where the Progressive novel's discourse of class will be turned into the postwar novel's discourse of race.

Nick's confusion arises in part because Gatsby initially appears oriented toward the "magically" (Michaels 26) transformative future and away from his possibly racially suspect grandfathers, who, as Horace Kallen reminds us, cannot be changed (220). Socioeconomic barriers give way before him: that he initially misleads Daisy into believing he is not, in fact, penniless is immaterial because all those things whose absence he conceals from her—including "one's clothes, one's manners, [and] one's friends," as Michaels puts it—are easily obtainable. But Gatsby's real problem, in Michaels's account, is that he is "without a past": he does not have an acceptable pedigree, and winning Daisy (in the nativist imaginary) requires that he have one. Only rewriting the (racialized) past—precisely what Gatsby cannot do through (economically) transformative agency—could "retroactively make him someone who could be 'married' to Daisy" (Michaels 26). The past cannot be changed; indeed, in Michaels's modernity,

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the "meaning" of an American's past "has been rendered genealogical," has been racialized, suggesting that no degree of class mobility can make Gatsby into something he is not (which is to say, in the crucial instance for Michaels, a [white] American). "Insofar as the desire for a different future is the desire to belong to a different class," Michaels argues, "the desire for a different past that replaces it should be understood as the desire to belong to a different race" (150).

It remains unclear, however, who Michaels imagines "should" be doing this understanding. He convincingly indicates the representation of nativism in the text by demonstrating how certain nativist characters respond to what they see as a racial threat. But this isn't the same as showing that Fitzgerald's novel enacts its cultural milieu's nativist worry over a racialized American identity, or illuminating "the structural intimacy between nativism and modernism." Racist characters alone do not make a racist book, and Michaels has done little to argue that Fitzgerald's book itself—rather than Tom and, to a lesser extent, Nick and Daisy, and, to a more "vulgar" extent, Myrtle Wilson and Lucille McKee (26)—is "deeply committed to the nativist project of racializing the American." It is indeed probable that "race" operates for Tom et al. as a self-evident category, but that doesn't mean that it necessarily does so for the text. Suppressing this distinction, Michaels doesn't engage Fitzgerald's complex relationship to the hold of self-evidence itself. In fact, we don't have to draw attention to the fantasy that signs like race are unproblematic in *The Great Gatsby:* the book already does this. Michaels sees *Gatsby* as a reactionary book because he doesn't account for how it already worries about the manner in which signs signify. Fitzgerald's novel is far more concerned about how identity is understood than it is about the representative traits of its particular characters. Michaels thus seems to treat the book in the same way that Tom, encouraged by "this man Goddard" (*Gatsby* 17), treats Gatsby: he reduces it to a simple signifier within an unquestioned sign system where race is already visible and subject to social hierarchy and valuation.[2]

In a book published the same year as *Our America,* Bryan Washington also appears to reduce the novel's perspective to that of a group of its characters. Like Michaels, Washington claims that *The Great Gatsby* is "preoccupied with and intolerant of the racial and social hybridization of America" (42) and that Gatsby is a threat to the "family" (45), the "Middle West," and to "the white cultural center" precisely because he "sprang from his Platonic conception of himself" (Washington 45; *Gatsby*

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104). Lacking the right kind of origin in a novel where all origins are racial, Gatsby is "the worst kind of outsider" (Washington 45). Also like Michaels, Washington sees Nick as nativist, even if, as in Nick's reaction to the "three modish negroes" in a limousine "driven by a white chauffeur" (*Gatsby* 73) who pass Gatsby and Nick on the way into the city,[3] it is less obtrusive than Tom's "unabashed racism" (Washington 43). Revealingly, Washington finds the many "so-called ethnic" names of Gatsby's party guests—as recorded by Nick—to

> clearly attest to *Fitzgeraldian* outrage at the new America, one in which so-called ethnics are ubiquitous—in which the citizens of East Egg, who form a "dignified homogeneity" in the midst of "many-colored, many-keyed commotion," must contend not only with the inhabitants of West Egg but with all of New York. (49; my emphasis)

The danger here, according to Washington, is that Gatsby stands "ready to welcome the masses," posing a threat to an embattled WASP America. But Washington ultimately doesn't suggest why Nick's behavior should be relied on as a key to Fitzgerald's agenda. He can finally argue that the "celebrated concluding paragraphs of *The Great Gatsby* compose a reactionary social manifesto dressed up in the romantic rhetoric of loss" (52) only by assuming that the novel doesn't allow for something outside Nick's self-admitted narrow-minded provincialism. As with Michaels, missing here is precisely the examination of how racial and ethnic difference become visible in the first place and operate within the text (as different from Nick's imagination) in the second place.

Unlike Michaels and Washington, Carlyle Van Thompson attends to how the text, and not just some of its characters, treats Gatsby, though he too rests his analysis on the categorical stability of race. Thompson notably reads Gatsby as a light-skinned African American; he cites, for example, repeated descriptions of Gatsby as "pale" that render his racial identity ambiguous (79), the novel's many associations of Gatsby with colors that associate him with minstrel imagery (85), and Nick's description of Gatsby's estate as having "forty acres of lawn and a garden," which associates Gatsby with Reconstruction. "Although the class and ethnic tensions in the novel are lucid," he argues, "literary scholars have not considered the theme of racial passing. Indeed, the narrative constantly whispers the presence of blackness" (75). Xenophobic, against immigration, and a

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white supremacist, Fitzgerald in Thompson's estimation makes passing a kind of impossible metaphor for achieving the American Dream (77–78). Indeed, Thompson casts *The Great Gatsby* as a product of Fitzgerald's anxiety about the racial other transposed onto the established American narrative of class aspiration; insofar as he evinces a "desire for whiteness," Thompson's Gatsby is threatening to the worldview with which the text allies itself (85). Along with the attempt at class passing, the novel's

> subversive subject is the paradoxical phenomenon of racial passing, the racial masquerade implicit to many black people's desire for enduring inclusion in the American Dream. By appropriating the symbolism, diction, and associations of racial passing, Fitzgerald illuminates the miscegenation core of the American Dream. (102)

However, if Thompson seeks to expose the reification of class in critical reception of the novel as having served actually to hide Fitzgerald's (and America's) own "specious" (102) reification of race—"simply put," he says, "race constructs class" (103)—he himself seems to participate in this reification by taking it as the key to this text: the visibility and ideological coherence of racial difference, that is, is assumed.

Meredith Goldsmith similarly locates reified ideological constructions of race at the center of Fitzgerald's book, though she finds them to work to opposite effect. The scandal of Gatsby's performance, according to Goldsmith, is his suppression of his "ambiguously ethnic, white, working-class origins" in a relatively successful "imitation of African-American and ethnic modes of self-definition" (443). Gatsby adopts modes of self-fashioning proper to African American passing narratives and ethnic (frequently Jewish) Americanization narratives, in both of which "racial and national identities become objects of imitation . . . through the apparatus of speech, costume, and manners" (443–44). Goldsmith understands Gatsby's negotiation with these non-WASP modes of performativity to underlie what for her is a desirable "explosion of the dialectic between imitation and authenticity," one by which "Fitzgerald refutes the possibility of any identity, whether racial, class, or ethnic, as 'the real thing'" (444) despite his flirtation with "the scientific racist thought of his day" (446). In fact, Goldsmith argues that reading the novel alongside "narratives of racial passing and ethnic Americanization complicates Fitzgerald's class politics" by "complexly and ambiguously intermingl[ing]" the "ostensibly

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biological imperatives of 'race' and the supposedly more fluid boundaries of class" (451). She sees this as a function of style: Fitzgerald "engage[ed] with the racially and ethnically diverse popular culture of his day through textual allusions and stylistic innovations" (463). However, though she reads the novel for its textual ironies, Goldsmith, like Michaels, Washington, and Thompson, ends up essentializing racial categories, claiming that Fitzgerald engaged in a "tacit dialogue with the African-American and ethnic literary context of the era" (445); her argument thus relies on the existential legitimacy of the very categories (or "contexts") she wants to debilitate. If Michaels and Washington accuse Fitzgerald of the racism of his characters, and Thompson reads one of his characters as black in order to accuse him of reproducing his culture's race panic, Goldsmith celebrates Fitzgerald for deconstructing the category of race because, in her account, a white character adopts behaviors that are the province of nonwhite people. These arguments depend on the logic they want to destabilize.

Finally, Betsy Nies, too, argues that the "theme of the rise and decline of a Nordic civilization prevails" in the novel (95), but in lieu of arguing either the book's racism or its performative potential, she promisingly claims that identity—especially as a racial category tied to the body—is held in contention by Fitzgerald's text, which, by worrying about the diminishing "physicality" of identity, focuses attention on the mechanisms by which race and ethnicity become legible as facts:

> The text's ethnic angst—registered both as a fear and fascination with shifting identities—seems bound up with the idea that identity itself may be a performance, a textual performance linked only loosely to some referential reality, not to a stable, definable body. The concern about Gatsby as either black or a new immigrant send-off seems based on the idea that Gatsby has created an identity, thus rendering the whole concept of identity as physically based unclear. Gatsby, of course, is the ultimate text, fabricating an identity in a unique imitation of the real. Nick's concerns over changing ethnic identities seem interminably tied to this concept of textuality. (102)

Because Gatsby can "narrate" his own identity, according to Nick's anxious logic, any identity can be "simulated" or "fabricated," endangering the physical foundation of Nick's own privileged WASP identity. Nick's reaction to Gatsby's prevarication about his past is important to Nies's argument:

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> Nick, while not concerned with racial purity *per se,* is still concerned with a certain type of eugenic logic when he tries to find out Gatsby's background. He looks desperately for a referent for Gatsby's sign, something to undergird and back up the image of the man Gatsby proposes to be. (103)

Nies reads Nick's faith in Gatsby as diminishing to the extent that he marks Gatsby's performance *as performance;* for as long as Gatsby sounds like a textual mélange, like discontinuous "bits and pieces of collected phrases" and "misplaced textuality removed from any defining anchoring physicality" (103), Nick distrusts him. But Gatsby's presentation of the photograph from Oxford quiets Nick's doubts and establishes, in Nies's words, "physical proof of his identity."

Nies wants to expose in Fitzgerald an anxious desire to hold on to the body or some other physical basis as "an anchor for the meaning of identity" (107), and she discovers a suspect nativist drive to conflate racial identity with nation in Nick's elegy to "my Middle-West . . . the thrilling, returning trains of my youth" (183) traveling at Christmas time through the "the real snow, our snow," and in his recognition of his own "complacen[cy] from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name" (184). For Nies, this scene presents

> a vision of ethnic similitude naturalized against the background of an American landscape. As the text ends, Nick returns to the image of the train tracks [the first tracks being those along the ash heaps], yet covers them not with the ashes of outlying New York, but with the snow of his Mid West. (104)

If the trains that travel to New York run through the anomic gray of racial and ethnic admixture, the trains that travel home to the Midwest, on which Nick and his WASP schoolmates are "unutterably aware of our identity with this country" (*Gatsby* 184), are invariably as white as snow. "What . . . seems threatened," as Nies sees it, "is a class and national identity which became registered through racial terms" (109). Not quite the eugenicist Nick is, Fitzgerald uses race to imagine a "homogeneous . . . physical body which carried with it all the referents for self-definition." Nies's *Gatsby* is a nostalgic text, longing "for a time when identities were tied firmly to fixed bodies" (102).

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But here Nies's argument typifies the way the genealogies of racialization offered by *Gatsby*'s recent critics depend on the racialist premise that race is physical, biological, or otherwise anchored in the body (rather than a more loosely defined if still binding representational category, which is perhaps closer to what these critics want to say[4]). Bodies can only be critically examined as sites of racialized discourse if they have already become "registered through racial terms." In other words, Nies, like many who share her interest in "whiteness studies" (xi), begins by assuming precisely what she proposes to provide a history of: the correlation of cultural discourse (about race) and physical body. In this context, her calling Gatsby's photograph from Oxford the "physical proof" that Nick needs to believe Gatsby's mostly fallacious story is telling: it betrays the equation of representation and thing in her interrogation of the book's concern with physicality. In fact, the photograph functions to undercut any attempt to rely on it as a benchmark of accuracy, and Nick's justification in understanding it as proof that Gatsby is telling the truth is certainly limited.[5]

The most important question in a genealogy of race, I'd argue, is how bodies become raced in the first place, not how they are administered by discourses like nativisim once they are raced. I don't really know how they get raced, but to limit oneself to examining the disposition of raced bodies within racist (and ultimately nationalist) discourses, as Michaels, Washington, Thompson, Goldsmith, and Nies all essentially do, is both to reproduce—according to their own shared logic—those racist (and ultimately nationalist) discourses and, more to the point, to preclude any critical account of the novel's participation in processes of racialization in the United States. Ironically, Nies gets this point perfectly as she ends: while Fitzgerald's anxious "rewrit[ing] and rephras[ing of] eugenic logic . . . suggests the difficulties of escaping the body as a textual ground for identity," it also "raises the possibility of rewriting social and ethnic hierarchies based on re-envisioning 'types'" (107). Thus it seems that the literary critic's job is done when blacks and immigrants, perhaps, are no longer the objects of racialist discourse, though some other, as yet undetermined, groups are.

The perspective common to these accounts finds nativism and racism in the text because it's looking for nativism and racism. Taking for granted that racial difference is already legible, such a perspective cannot really offer an explanation of how race becomes legible. Interpretation in this

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mode is built on a desire to recognize current understandings of identity in the past. But by offering a prescribed discovery of the present in the past and of "America" in American literature, recent criticism of Gatsby's racialization illustrates the machinery of literary critical Americanism. In fact, while these readings are grounded in a faith in the stability and national significance of identity, *The Great Gatsby* lacks precisely this faith. This book does not simply illustrate patterns of identity and thereby invest them with particular political meanings that remain—at least insofar as they always already are—recognizable and valid within a larger, essentially statist inquiry into American literature and culture. Focusing on the techniques of the text's narrative management of identity rather than on locating the validity of particular images of identity in the text reveals this inquiry at work in Fitzgerald's American novel. It also indicates a way to examine how racialism may serve to compensate for—and fill the breach left by—this problem in the thinking of identity.

Narrating Nick's Gatsby: The form of cynicism

The Great Gatsby is cynical about identity as a sentimentally invested category: while it rehearses the desire that identity serve as an interpretive key to America, the book insists on that desire's frustration and fundamental inconsequence. Through its administration of longing, Fitzgerald's text resists the attempt to recognize identity—including raced identity—as nationally representative. Analysis not of *what* identities the book represents but of *how* it narrates identity—including the emotional and epistemological network identity occupies, the desire, intention, and imagination it constitutes—helps us avoid reducing Fitzgerald's novel to an instrumental accessory of racialist Americanist ideology. The principle forum in which the text carries out this narration is Nick's conflicted assessment of his experiences, and the structure of this assessment is established fairly early on. A scene in the second chapter articulates a model of intelligence—one always in contention with an impulse to reify, at once holding on to the fetish it makes of experience and exposing it as such—that will underlie Gatsby's significance to Nick and the novel's cynical approach to American identity.

Dragged by Tom to meet his mistress, Myrtle Wilson, Nick spends a drunken evening in the Washington Heights apartment Tom keeps for her. While he is as straightforward as he gets in describing his displeasure,

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Nick also admits to being captivated. Both eyewitness and participant, at once disdainful and attracted, Nick feels at the same time an urge to escape and a sense of wonder:

> I wanted to get out and walk eastward toward the park through the soft twilight, but each time I tried to go I became entangled in some wild, strident argument which pulled me back, as if with ropes, into my chair. Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.[6] (40)

Repeated throughout the novel, this sense of being both inside and outside indicates Nick's alienation—by turns compelling and cowardly—but it also discloses the structure of Nick's ambivalent skepticism, a form of intelligence marked by a conviction of its own impertinence. As the tension between estrangement and participation mounts, disaffection and desire butt heads over the same object. *The Great Gatsby* never resolves these two equally persuasive positions: announced in his brief prologue, where he admits to contemning the world Gatsby gorgeously represented but also to admiring Gatsby's existential magnanimity, Nick's ambivalence underlies the book's cynicism.

Nick thinks of himself as an outsider—and as having a kind of autonomy. That the war left him apprehensive that the "Middle West" (7) of his youth, that erstwhile "warm center of the world," is in fact the "ragged edge of the universe" intimates a new independence, and once on Long Island, he delights in the proud residential "freedom" a tourist's request for information confers upon him. Nick's attempt to end his "rumored" engagement and the observation that he is "a little disgusted" (24–25) with Daisy and Tom also contribute to a narrative of sovereignty. He displays just enough contempt that we want to trust him.[7]

We suspect, however, that his autonomy may not be inviolate. We know at the outset, for example, that he eventually gives up on the East, presumably defeated by the "foul dust" (7) that circulated around Gatsby. And his independence is certainly embattled in Washington Heights, where his attempts to reclude himself are foiled by his "entangle[ment]." The apartment is claustrophobic: it

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> was on the top floor—a small living-room, a small dining-room, a small bedroom, and a bath. The living-room was crowded to the doors with a set of tapestried furniture entirely too large for it, so that to move about was to stumble continually over scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles. (33)

Though containing at its fullest only six people—Nick, Tom, Myrtle, Catherine, and Chester and Lucille McKee—the apartment overflows. Myrtle's proclamation that "I'm going to make a list of all the things I've got to get. . . . I got to write down a list so I won't forget all the things I got to do" (41) aggravates this sense of congestion. Even the photograph on the wall (later revealed to be of Myrtle and Catherine's mother) is "over-enlarged" (33). And Myrtle herself, her ego fed by Tom, is monstrously uncontained: "Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment, and as she expanded the room grew smaller around her, until she seemed to be revolving on a noisy, creaking pivot through the smoky air" (35).

Nick's attempts to leave the congested apartment for the expansive "soft twilight" outside are thwarted—"each time I tried to go I became entangled . . . as if with ropes"—but he is also outside, looking up in wonder at the mysteries lying behind that "line of yellow windows." Provincial Nick is now drawn toward the spectacle. Still inside—"I was him ["the casual watcher on the darkening streets"] *too*" (my emphasis)—"wonder" supplements "entangle[ment]." Nick is at once critical and inside the apartment, annoyed by its tacky pretension, and compelled and outside, spellbound by its promise. Alienation and fascination are simultaneous. If he bristles at the "inexhaustible" degeneracy of the scene, the "variety of life" he glimpses challenges his self-assurance. Neither enchantment nor scorn alone is an adequate response. This scene characterizes the way Nick experiences and knows in this novel, and it points to the manner of the text's disposition of sentimental attraction. Simultaneously in his encounters and outside them, both "within and without," Nick construes experience as both affective and analytical, at once earnest and ironic.

This theme of imaginative doubling is well established in Fitzgerald scholarship, even if its full implications have not been pursued. John Aldridge, a whipping-boy of recent "lost generation" criticism, calls attention to an opposition between a "spectatorial role" and a "role of active participation" common to Fitzgerald and his peers:

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> The two together—the sentimental and essentially immature longing of the observer . . . and the premature disillusion of the participant who saw too much too soon—seem to me to account for the duality of so much of the literature that generation produced. (6)

Arthur Mizener quotes Fitzgerald's friend John Peale Bishop (from an October 1921 article in *Vanity Fair*) that Fitzgerald had "the rare faculty of being able to experience romantic and ingenuous emotions and half an hour later regard them with satiric detachment." As Mizener himself elaborates, "At his best, his mind apprehended things simultaneously with a participant's vividness of feeling and an intelligent stranger's acuteness of observation" (xxi). Later, Mizener cites Malcolm Cowley:

> It was as if . . . all his novels described a big dance to which he had taken . . . the prettiest girl . . . and as if at the same time he stood outside the ballroom, a little Midwestern boy with his nose to the glass, wondering how much the tickets cost and who paid for the music. (qtd. in Mizener 63)

Here, Fitzgerald is both knowingly immersed and ingenuously excluded; the affiliations of inside and outside are reversed. Fitzgerald's "double vision" is revealed as a tension alternatively between earnestness and irony and between participation and naïveté. Identification in Fitzgerald shuttles between dispossession and involvement, governed by neither a simple opposition of inside and outside nor a narrative of corruption. Nick's adventure with Myrtle and Tom reveals a desire for identification that ultimately precludes the emotional investment it demands. Cynicism makes its first appearance in *The Great Gatsby* as desire's proleptic knowledge of its own shortcomings.

This cynicism will govern Nick's final judgment of Gatsby, his simultaneous craving and unwillingness to identify with him. If Gatsby is attractive in his "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life" (Gatsby 6) and his rare sincerity, then Nick, in declaring also that Gatsby "represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn," marks disenchantment as the register in which that sensitivity and sincerity are proven to be incommensurate with the welter of clichés to which they were directed. Gatsby's naively romantic sincerity and sentimental dream of fetishized identity, of course, are not the center of this text; their impertinence is,

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and while Nick remains skeptically incapable of identifying with Gatsby's desire, he also wants to disown the conditions that undermine it. Nick reads Gatsby's fate through his own ambivalence, caught between acknowledging Gatsby's effort to maintain ignorance on the one hand and the benign productivity enabled by such ignorance on the other. As we do, he sees through Gatsby long before he starts liking him, but he *does* start liking him, and the end of the book is nothing if not an attempted defense of him. The text puts us in the position of wanting to sanction both poles of Nick's ambivalence, rendering Nick—precisely in his skepticism—the reader's potential proxy. Indeed, the one thing Nick does that the reader really cannot sanction is retreating back to the Midwest, racially pure or not. This is decisive: just as Nick can't quite identify with Gatsby, so the reader can't quite apologize for Nick. But if this novel is not really about Gatsby, Nick—with whom we feel more empathy—untragically validates Gatsby's failure, and not the dream it followed: Gatsby mistakenly believed he was justified in shaping his world, while Nick correctly knows he is unjustified in valuing Gatsby's imaginative labor.[8] So, while *The Great Gatsby* is more fundamentally the story of Nick Carraway's disillusionment than it is of Jimmy Gatz's tragic rise and fall, it is about Nick precisely to the extent of his miscarried identification with Gatsby. Through Nick, Fitzgerald's novel dramatizes a naive longing for interpretive security. If it emerges in desire's canny bad conscience before Nick even meets Gatsby, the novel's cynicism coalesces around the representation of Nick's disenchanted and unsustainable identification with Gatsby's failure. Staging an identification that ultimately cannot be consummated even as it is repeated for the reader, this book renders representivity itself untenable.

Nick never discovers something in Gatsby that survives outside Gatsby's sentimental delusion. The discomfiture or Gatsby's naive imaginative project and the banality by which it is framed articulate for Nick Gatsby's inevitable trajectory: Gatsby is a cliché searching, via Nick, for substance. He expends himself in his vigorous, futile faith, and Nick is left alienated from this faith because he knows it transcends nothing of its contemptible field of exercise. The pathos of Nick's "You're worth the whole damn bunch put together," coming on the heels of "They're a rotten crowd," is that Gatsby may stand out from his milieu, but it is a milieu he has chosen.

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> I've always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him, because I disapproved of him from beginning to end. . . . His gorgeous pink rag of a suit made a bright spot of color against the white steps, and I thought of the night when I first came to his ancestral home, three months before. The lawn and drive had been crowded with the faces of those who guessed at his corruption—and he had stood on those steps, concealing his incorruptible dream, as he waved them good-by. (162)

Critics interested in exposing the lineaments of racialist discourse in the novel might see here the text's implication of Gatsby in practices of concealment and passing (*pace* Thompson) or its ironic foreclosure of Gatsby's impossible claim to ancestry (*pace* Michaels), but such attempts would belie the cynical negotiation of pathos through which the text narrates Nick's appraisal of Gatsby. The opposition of Gatsby's rumored "corruption" and his actual "incorruptible dream" is transfigured in Nick's ambivalent transit between admiration and scorn. Refusing to wise up, Gatsby is never really deceived by the failure of his vision. Nick, however, is another story, insofar as he tries to draw meaning from the "foul dust [that] floated in the wake of [Gatsby's] dreams" (7). Nick's Gatsby stands out like his suit against the steps, like his "complete isolation" at the first party (60), because he has to, because this is how Nick rescues Gatsby's imagination from its "rotten" setting.

Despite the best efforts of its titular character, *The Great Gatsby* is about knowing better. Nick's disenchanted knowledge at the novel's end of Gatsby's perversely naive desire is framed by that desire's optimistic trajectory. This tension between the propulsive energy of the imagination and skepticism about its experiential investment is heralded in the interrogation of hope in the novel's initial pages, an interrogation that forges an alliance between Nick and Gatsby. Nick first claims, in discussing himself, that "[r]eserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope" (6). If he in fact finds it difficult to reserve judgment, his narrative nonetheless offers a kind of testimony to a "hope" that Gatsby would, indeed, repay his investment of attention. Nick soon invokes hope once more, this time in the context of introducing Gatsby's "gorgeous" sincerity, a "responsiveness" that was also "an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it

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is not likely I shall ever find again." Through the linking term of a hope that he has not quite embraced, Nick reveals how hard he tries to disown his skepticism, insofar as it is a skepticism that—as the ensuing narrative will reveal—short-circuits identification and therefore the possibility of forging useful knowledge from experience. At the end of the book (as at the beginning), only Nick cannot find such significance; like Tom and Daisy (and every other figure in the novel's rogues' gallery), Gatsby has absolute faith in experience's significance, believes experience to be an affair of signs that bear the straightforward representations of desire. If Tom and Daisy provide Nick with evidence that he is right to presume that experience cannot be affirmatively significant, Gatsby offers impossible confirmation of imagination's benign productivity.

Nick leaves the East finding "riotous excursions" distracting, but they are distracting because, despite hope's "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life," those promises can never be fulfilled. The "extraordinary gift" bestowed by Gatsby's hope survives in—but only in—its degradation: "No—Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it was what preyed on Gatsby . . . that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men" (7). Nick finds value in Gatsby's dream precisely in its naïveté, but this discovery also marks that desire as unavailable. Gatsby's naïveté is his expectation that he will find what he longs for, his fundamental faith that experience follows desire; indeed, his naïveté figures its own imaginative potential.[9] Yet Nick's commentary narrates hope's ultimate failure: Gatsby's idealism is continuous with Nick's skepticism. Nick neither can nor, it turns out, does he necessarily desire to look at the world except through the broken prism of Gatsby's shattered dream; Gatsby's hope survives, but only in Nick's rejection, only at the inaccessible limit of the text's cynical production of reality.

This ambivalence becomes obvious in Nick's imaginary account of Gatsby's final moments before Wilson murders him:

> I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn't believe it [Daisy's call] would come, and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. (169)

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Gatsby's disillusionment is a possibility only for Nick. Gatsby dies before what would have been the disappointing revelation of Daisy's return to Tom. Nick's repetition of "must have" tries to ascribe disillusionment to Gatsby, but it is Nick, not Gatsby, who questions whether Gatsby "paid a high price for living too long with a single dream," who wonders if Gatsby "must have felt that he had lost the old warm world," and whether Gatsby saw a "new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about." Nick, not Gatsby, must live with the memory of a broken dream, and ascribing it is the only way he can understand his impossible appropriation of Gatsby. Desire and knowledge intersect without reaching a tenable equilibrium; they merely insist on each other's inadequacy, and thus identification necessarily fails, precisely where it is desired. Gatsby represents nothing besides the desire that he be representative.

Cynicism, longing, and America

There is no good reason to assume that this troubling of the machinery of representation safely stops at the covers of the book; this cynical novel destabilizes the literary critical desire to identify characters with nationalist discourses. The disruption of Nick's ability to imagine hope figures the larger failure of the book itself to satisfy Americanism's instrumentalist desire. Cynicism in the novel is a function of knowing. A notable irony of the novel (to judge from the frequency with which it has been noted) is how Gatsby differs from so many assumptions about him. From the perspective of, say, Tom, Gatsby appears practiced and awkward, a dangerous and morally dubious embodiment of an ascendant nouveau-riche culture; but if Tom's "little investigation" (141) into Gatsby's past essentially confirms his suspicions, Tom comes off looking bad because this confirmation comprehends little that the novel thinks is important about Gatsby. When Nick meets him, Gatsby looks like a faker with stiff speech and transparent stories, and again, while strictly speaking this is true, it is also unsatisfying as an account of Gatsby. In Louisville, Daisy never questions her assumption that he is a wealthy WASP (for Michaels, "someone who could be 'married' to [her]"). Indeed, with the possible exceptions of Jordan and Wolfshiem, everybody reads Gatsby through flawed assumptions about him. Nick's early misinterpretation of Gatsby is particularly indicative. Just returned from his "confus[ing]" dinner at the Buchanans, Nick sights

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Gatsby in his back yard, "standing with his hands in his pockets regarding the silver pepper of the stars. Something in his leisurely movements and the secure position of his feet upon the lawn suggested that it was Mr. Gatsby himself, come out to determine what share was his of our local heavens" (25). This passage hints at the trope of longing with which Nick will associate Gatsby, but it is conspicuous because Nick is essentially wrong. Gatsby is there not in a proprietary capacity but in fact out of desire for the one thing he is not able to own.

Gatsby's gestures compel Nick to the extent that Nick assumes they signify, but these gestures will in fact demonstrate how Nick's desire to read Gatsby through his own expectations subverts itself. As an aspect of the apparatus of self, gesture is important in this book, in large part, perhaps, because our attention is drawn to it from the outset, when Nick asserts that a key to understanding personality is its apprehension as "an unbroken series of successful gestures." We more fully appreciate what Nick hopes he means a little later: Nick's first introduction to Gatsby would have been embarrassing for Nick had Gatsby not been so magnanimous. Radiating "eternal reassurance," Gatsby's smile at Nick's confusion exemplifies Gatsby at his finest:

> It faced—or seemed to face—the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on *you* with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey.[10] (52–53)

It is just this gesture's success that is at stake here, however. Ultimately Gatsby appears too self-aware for Nick's comfort. "Precisely at that point" the smile "vanished—and [Nick] was looking at an elegant young roughneck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd" (53). Nick "got the strong impression that he [Gatsby] was picking his words with care." Compelled by the subjectivity promised in Gatsby's gestures, Nick catastrophically pierces their surface. In Gatsby's car on the way to the city, Nick allows,

> I had talked with him perhaps half a dozen times in the past month and found, to my disappointment, that he had little to say. So my first impression, that he was a person of some undefined

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> consequence, had gradually faded and he had become simply the proprietor of an elaborate road-house next door . . . leaving his elegant sentences unfinished and slapping himself indecisively on the knee of his caramel-colored suit. (69)

But of course this isn't quite right, either, as neither Nick nor his book believes with any conviction that Gatsby is "simply the proprietor of an elaborate road-house." However perversely, Gatsby never completely fails to make available for Nick a kind of untenable agency.

Nick's interpretive error as he watches Gatsby reach out across the bay is thus as alienating as it is doubly misleading: precisely to the extent that he reads Gatsby according to his own preconceptions, he projects onto Gatsby an ideal form of subjectivity that finally destabilizes his own faith in agency and, more fundamentally, representation. In this sense it is telling from the standpoint of the literary critical history of this book that Nick identifies Gatsby with a particular kind of longing on first seeing him. Longing operates in two modes in this book, and Nick, because of the kind of person he is at this point in the story, here incorrectly categorizes Gatsby's. First, there is the longing whose satisfaction is assumed; this is the kind experienced by most of the book's characters, including Nick when he initially comes East and, conspicuously, Gatsby in his desire for Daisy. Such longing is never anxious, never assailed by doubt. Just as Gatsby cannot question Daisy's devotion, so Nick never doubts himself, and so Tom and Daisy do not worry about whether life will answer to their demands and allow them to be "careless" (187). But then there is the kind of longing, privileged insofar as it frames the narrative, that underlies Nick's wanting "the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever" that he intimates at the novel's opening (6) and that, frustrated, leaves the East "haunted" and "distorted beyond my eyes' power of correction" at the novel's close (185). This kind of longing is fundamentally insecure, and it is ironically this kind that Nick mistakenly ascribes to Gatsby when he first sees him, though it takes him the better part of the novel to discover his mistake.

In fact, longing for significance—for representation—always undercuts understanding of Gatsby. It's not just that the signifier "Gatsby" shuttles between several interpretations and therefore has an indeterminate meaning; more profoundly, the text undermines this sign's interpretation in general, challenges the claim that it *means*. In the way this book sees how

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longing underwrites understanding—on the one hand how the longing for recognizability shapes an understanding that confirms what is already presumed, on the other how an anxious longing yields an understanding that defies expectations but only too late—it destabilizes the expectation of discovery that prompts so much inquiry both in and about it: whether it is Tom's a priori doubt that Gatsby is who he says he is, a doubt that leads to a shallow if accurate discovery; Nick's hereditary assumption that he is an excellent judge of character, an assumption whose failure essentially constitutes *The Great Gatsby*'s dramatic arc; or, finally, the long postwar literary critical history of this novel that always already expects to find America in it, a history that includes the recent presumption that the novel offers a window onto the dynamics of US racialization. Gatsby may be "the ultimate text," as Betsy Nies contends, but the presumption that this text means something specific has structured interpretation of this great American novel's great American. Indeed, this textual Gatsby is always presumed to represent the meaning of "America." Just as nativist Tom, aroused by "this man Goddard," worries that Gatsby represents the approaching miscegenation of America, and as Nick, finally enchanted by Gatsby's unfailing belief in the "orgastic future" even as it bears him "back ceaselessly into the past," hopes Gatsby represents the confident American optimism with which they grew up "where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night" (189), so postwar criticism cannot help, it seems, but read him as the historical key to understanding American society. But Gatsby always resists these readings.

Looking back on the enthusiasm of the Twenties from the postcrash perspective of 1931, Fitzgerald wrote,

> it seemed only a question of a few years before the older people would step aside and let the world be run by those who saw things as they were—and it all seems rosy and romantic to us who were young then, because we will never feel so intensely about our surroundings any more. ("Echoes" 22)

This final sentiment sums up Nick's sense of lost possibility, but the lost "rosy and romantic" eagerness was Gatsby's; the book enforces a frustrating—indeed, a subversive—separation between experience and meaning. Chip Rhodes has written that American literary history has largely conceptualized the Twenties through the era's own partial understanding of itself: "The clichés about the period we alternatively embrace and debunk

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were clichés to the participants themselves" (3). But if *The Great Gatsby* helped create some of these clichés, at least in light of Fitzgerald's later piece it also pierces them—but only enough to annul the pleasure they grant. Cynicism is the sad knowledge thus produced. This book dramatizes meaning's escape from the desire to fit experience into identifiable patterns that render it representative. While a character like Tom—and recent critics like Michaels et al.—may evade this indeterminacy in favor of the racial decisiveness of nativism, the novel does not. It does not take any a sign system—racial or otherwise—for granted, either as sociological bedrock or as the basis of a critical methodology.

If Gatsby seeks to recognize the image of his desire in experience, Nick, initially presuming his own ability to read experience as a set of relatively uncomplicated signs, eventually reinscribes that experience as evidence of desire's frustration. In this way Fitzgerald's novel surprisingly articulates literary criticism's long history of taking it—in particular its "aboutness"—for granted. Through Nick's contradictory representations of Gatsby, at once positioning Gatsby's idealism as an object of desire and exposing it as ridiculously sentimental, the novel leaves some troubling implications in its narrative wake, suggesting that the recognizable interpretations we want to retrieve from it, admittedly intimated in the text, ultimately remain inaccessible. The elegiac final pages of the book, in which Nick attempts to recover Gatsby, are radically ambivalent; their backward glance, while pervaded with longing, is also shot through with foreclosure. "Gatsby's house was still empty when I left—the grass on his lawn had grown as long as mine" (188): the house can no longer signify anything without also signifying that Gatsby is no longer in it, no longer available. Nick's success in avoiding the taxi driver who "never took a fare past the entrance gate without stopping for a minute and pointing inside" suggests only a miscarried triumph; the driver really only underscores Nick's more fundamental inability to evade the grip of Gatsby's irretrievability.

Gatsby's catastrophe, in Nick's disappointed appropriation of it, exposes in a darkly fraught image the catachresis underlying America's emblematic representationality. Just as Nick can value Gatsby's magisterial if naive confidence in agency only by recognizing what he calls its "appalling sentimentality," so the imagination adequate to America's new world endures only in its ephemeral emergence from the vast landscape of its inadequacy:

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> And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate with his capacity for wonder. (189)

Nick's vision of "inessential houses" that "melt away" recalls Gatsby's early Lake Superior "reveries," which offered "an outlet for his imagination . . . a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded on a fairy's wing" (105). Once the accidental burden of "reality" is lifted, Nick sees what Gatsby must have seen, "a fresh, green breast of the new world," the "wonder" of imperial creativity formally nourishing Gatsby's "first pick[ing] out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock."

But it is Gatsby who is associated with "America," not Nick, Gatsby who faced "something commensurate to his capacity for wonder." What belongs to Nick is the transitoriness of this "enchanted moment." Indeed, in describing this moment of America's ideal genesis, Nick recurs to his familiar "must have" construction—a form of presumption to which he appeals whenever his attempted identification with Gatsby threatens the judgment from which, despite his opening protestations, he derives so much confidence and self-recognition. He has America on his mind in this closing passage, as he has throughout the novel, and the irreversibility of this "transitory enchanted moment" maps the novel's Americanism. Gatsby did not know, as Nick now does, that his dream is "already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night" (189), and not, in fact, "so close." If Nick wants to associate Gatsby with America, he also knows such an association is impossible—not because Gatsby never achieved his tawdry dream but because the only justification this dream ever had, the one Nick articulates for it, lies in an inaccessibly fictional national past. America is an idea inextricable from the absurdity of its realization: this book cannot separate the epistemological majesty of the

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imperial enterprise from its articulation in Gatsby's "roadhouse." But that doesn't simply mean that American history is a tale of corruption. In this book, the pure ideality of "America" is not betrayed by experience; on the contrary, experience is betrayed by the ideal fiction called "America."

On the final page, Nick's shift from the third person to the first seems to associate him with Gatsby's imaginative strivings: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us" (189). And yet Nick breaks with Gatsby on this very point: Nick may want to believe in the orgastic future, but it is still only Gatsby who "believed in the green light." The "inessential" landscape of Long Island was all there ever was to the epistemological productivity of "America," but it only becomes inessential in comparison to its toxic ideal image. This is the remnant of Gatsby's powerful desire, and it is the knowledge Nick can neither dismiss nor embrace. If Gatsby's tragedy was born in his making a fetish of possibility, then Nick's cynical elegy for Gatsby marks the irretrievability of an always fetishized "American" identity—though it may be tempting for criticism to try to recuperate the origin of current articulations of "America" from the literary past. Finally, Gatsby's earnest desire coincides with Nick's skeptical knowledge; the conclusion might seem to offer an image of identification but actually encodes dispossession, as Nick is left haunted by what Gatsby couldn't achieve even as he tries to hide this failure behind an idealized national image. In excavating the idealism underlying sentimental desire, *The Great Gatsby* exposes the sentimentalism underlying idealistic desire. Possibly in spite of itself, much of the historicist criticism that seeks national images of America's racialized identity in *The Great Gatsby*'s literary past remains confined within the Americanist romance of self-fashioning, in which self and nation are metaphorically bound to each other. But this romance relies on an assumption that identity is something existentially stable and epistemologically secure. In fact, this novel stages a splitting of identity into a desire and a knowledge that can never coincide. This novel is not about American identity; instead, it offers disappointed testimony to the impossibility that America can mean anything one wants it to mean. Race becomes, then, another attempt to displace, by reinscribing, this fundamental challenge to statist thinking. The cynical American, Nick, looks back from the moment of frustrated imperfection to the receding ground of perfection, as "America," the ideal anchor of American literary criticism, dissolves in the inessential sentimentality of naive desire.

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Notes

1. An abundant body of scholarship has of course located the significance of *The Great Gatsby* in its treatment of the American Dream and in whether the novel is a critique of or appeal to that promise. C. W. E. Bigsby nicely encapsulates this tragic reading: "Gatsby, after all, is corrupted not simply by money but by his naive faith in the integrity and permanence of innocence" (137). Harold Bloom has monumentalized this iconic reading: "Whatever the American Dream has become, its truest contemporary representative remains Jay Gatsby, at once a gangster and a Romantic Idealist, and above all a victim of his own High Romantic, Keatsian dream of love" (1).

2. It may be helpful to understand this move in the context of Michaels's early work with Steven Knapp; given their insistence in "Against Theory" on the identity of meaning and intended meaning, which really resolves into an identity between a thing and its interpreted meaning (730–31), Michaels may in fact be forced into his claim that *The Great Gatsby* is a nativist text.

3. Recent criticism of the novel's interest in race frequently turns to this scene.

4. Arguably, this is precisely the charge Michaels tries to answer in "The Autobiography of an Ex-White Man," an article that came out two years after *Our America*, which argues that race is not a social construction. Michaels defines the position that race is a social construction as the opposite of the position that race is a biological fact; however, he understands this opposition wholly under the authority of its biological essentialist pole even as he suggests that such an essentialism is nonsense. He believes, that is, that if race isn't biological, it doesn't exist. Surely there is a distinction, however, between illusion and belief—indeed, Michaels suggested as much in "Against Theory," where he and Steven Knapp argue that "theory" is, essentially, wrong insofar as belief "can never be separated from practice" and "theory is nothing else but the attempt to escape practice" (741–42).

"Autobiography" has two overt goals: first, to argue that "race" is a theoretical "mistake" (131, 143), a claim that few intelligent people would want to dispute; and second, to expose "social constructionism" as lacking coherence and theoretical rigor. Michaels also seems to have one slightly less overt goal, which is to continue his career-long opposition to nonsubjectivist, nonintentional, and institutional accounts of knowledge. His argument against the social construction of race is that, regardless of how "antiessentialist" one presumes to be, "our actual racial practices, the way people talk about and theorize race . . . can be understood only as the expression of our commitment to the idea that race is *not* a social construction. . . . Either race is an essence or there is no such thing as race" (125). It is built on a foundation of false (or certainly deceptively

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incomplete) dualisms—such as that between color and ancestry as determinative of race (128); that race must be either concealed or acknowledged by its raced subject, or that race is necessarily either embodied or represented (with both of these terms understood as active, transitive verbs whose subject is the person doing the embodying or representing [129]); that between acting and being (130); and that between culture (that is, a set of practices defined along intentional, "performative" [again, understood transitively] lines) and what for Michaels is always biological essence (139), to name a few—that, in addition to exposing his true agenda, vitiate his argument. By reducing the cultural problem of race to its disputed biological foundation, Michaels hopes to dismiss it: "race [is] the sort of the thing which, if it doesn't exist in nature, doesn't exist at all" (132). Thus, exposing race as a mistake will "produce a world in which race was *not* a compelling reality" (131). But his argument depends on reducing social constructionism (and its understanding of race) to a purely intentional, agential, and voluntaristic affair; if race is constituted through practices, Michaels understands these practices only as either adopted or declined by the (potentially) raced subject. This is to say that he thinks the essentialist-constructionist debate is perfectly reducible to the being-acting dualism, a dualism which is comprehended wholly under the authority of individual purposive agency.

His evocation of a blues musician might seem to have a seductive logic: "Race no more follows music than music follows race; what you become by playing the blues is a blues musician, not a black person" (134). But the argument here does not account for practices that, instead of being adopted or not by a potentially raced subject, can be recognized in that subject by another subject capable (for whatever reasons) of ascribing "race" as an attribute of others; "mistake" or not, "race" is certainly real in the sense that it authorizes actual social, cultural, and historical practices. Let me rephrase that: if the belief that blues playing produces blackness and the belief that allows white police officers to rape an African American man with a toilet plunger are both incorrect beliefs, they are incorrect in different ways. Blues playing, surely, is not the same kind of racial signifier as the likelihood of being violated in a police station by white public servants, and they certainly don't function in the same way; one cannot pass as white by choosing not to be raped by white cops in the same way that one can pass by choosing to eschew raced signifiers (such as by not playing blues or not frequenting blues clubs known for largely African American clientele). Michaels's argument does not account for this difference, and thus the definition of social constructionism that he attacks is essentially a straw man.

5. The photograph is of "half a dozen young men in blazers loafing in an archway through which were visible a host of spires. There was Gatsby, looking a

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little, not much, younger—with a cricket bat in his hand" (71). The ridiculousness of Nick's response to the photo is telling: "Then it was all true. I saw the skins of tigers flaming in his palace on the Grand Canal; I saw him opening a chest of rubies to ease, with their crimson-lighted depths, the gnawings of his broken heart." Even if the absurdity of this description is meant sarcastically to suggest that Nick, like all of Gatsby's guests, is falling prey to the "romantic speculation he [Gatsby] inspired" (48), Nick does, at least for the moment, seem to believe Gatsby.

6. There are many reasons for Nick's not wanting to be in Myrtle's apartment. For one, he has been introduced to her against his will; Tom's determination to bring him to meet her "bordered on violence" (28), figuring Nick's failed resistance. From their time at Yale, Nick already knows Tom to be arrogant; his evening at the Buchanans' house in East Egg only emphasized Tom's brutality. And Nick's Midwestern distaste—what he will a little later call his "provincial inexperience" (54) and much later his "provincial squeamishness" (188)—is probably piqued by Tom's keeping a mistress, especially at the expense of Nick's own once-removed second cousin. Finally, Nick is used to exercising control over experience, and the day's events, his drunkenness not least among them, have wrested a fair amount of that control from him. Yet despite this constellation of negative predispositions, Nick finds simple disapproval insufficient.

7. While we may not finally be able always to trust Nick as a reliable narrator, we appreciate his skepticism as a useful trait in the circles he travels.

8. *The Great Gatsby* can be construed as a tragedy only if it is construed as a story about Gatsby and therefore about the failed convergence of knowledge and desire. See Bloom, for example, or Ronald Berman, who argues that Gatsby necessarily fails to "assemble" a nineteenth-century romantic persona in a twentieth-century relativistic world (*Modern Times* 189, 105–06, 165) and that Gatsby—and through him Nick—struggles heroically and creatively, if ultimately unavailingly, in an antagonistic world: "The end sentence of this novel describes resistance, not acquiescence, navigation and not drift. I think that its key word is 'against'" (*World of Ideas* 196). Another characteristic account is provided by Marius Bewley, who argues that the novel is about the confrontation between illusion and reality, and in particular that Gatsby never succeeds in seeing through the ridiculous sham of his world. In its insistent representation of the doomed attempt to invest illusions with faith, "*The Great Gatsby* becomes the acting out of the tragedy of the American vision" (26).

9. Gatsby's fetishistic idealism manipulates with great energy the consumerist ethos of twentieth-century capitalism—but its misapplication is tragicomic. Recall Gatsby's shirts:

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> He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher—shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue. Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily. (97–98)

Each tossed shirt is an emblem both of the scope of Gatsby's imagination and of the fact that Nick and this text have no faith in it. In a rare and paradoxical display of perspicacity, Daisy realizes this too, but at the same moment she reveals herself at her most banal. The perversity of Gatsby's success is underscored by Daisy's base defeat: "They're such beautiful shirts," she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. "It makes me sad because I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before" (98). In Gatsby's ability to make beautiful that "for which [Nick has] unaffected scorn," Nick realizes that Gatsby's idealistic imagination is misaligned, but its energy is not lost on Nick.

10. Nick is never himself so generous, and looks to see through most people right away.

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Cather's *A Lost Lady* and the Disenchantment of Art

Chad Trevitte

Since the 1970s, studies of Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* mount a critique of previous readings, which largely see the novel as mourning the loss of a heroic pioneer past in the face of an exploitative, materialistic age. Such critics as Dalma H. Brunauer and Kathleen L. Nichols focus on Neil Herbert's unreliable perspective of Marian Forrester, dissociating his view from that of the narrator and thereby situating Cather's work as a commentary on the confining roles of women,[1] while Joseph R. Urgo and Nina Schwartz emphasize Neil's regressive investment in frontier myth and his flawed sense of historical reality.[2] If Niel's anxious response to a changing social world has affinities with Cather's, the perspective of the novel isn't entirely identified with that of its young protagonist. Rather, the narrative evokes a romantic sense of nostalgia even as it represents this nostalgia as a form of blindness.

The tension in *A Lost Lady* between illusion and disillusionment, romance and realism, also speaks to the role of art in modernity. Indeed, the novel offers not only an allegory of innocence and experience in the figure of Niel, or an allegory of social change in the decline of Marian Forrester, but also an allegory of aesthetic value that mediates between the two. For if Niel Herbert struggles to reconcile himself with a world that violates his ideals, he also wishes to elevate Marian Forrester into a purified, sublimated artifact, uncontaminated by erotic or economic transactions. In this sense, Niel's aesthetic idealism at once registers his own adolescent sexual anxiety and represents his attempt to retain a closed sphere of value in response to a social world in which value has become increasingly fungible—the world of economic exchange and

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commerce as embodied in the rise of Ivy Peters. Yet insofar as Niel adopts a postromantic view of art as a refuge from materialism, I will argue that his dilemma is symptomatic of how such a cultural paradigm of aesthetic autonomy has become both more pronounced and more contradictory in the modernist era.

To examine this problem in *A Lost Lady* is to consider how the novel reflects on its own governing aesthetic principles and how those principles are informed by a broader, socially symbolic economy of sexual and financial exchange. A closer look at how Cather's novel correlates the key themes of aesthetic autonomy, sexual mores, and economic value can enhance its significance as a response to its historical moment, while also clarifying its role as a distinctly modernist text.

§

Much commentary on the significance of *A Lost Lady* (1923) in the trajectory of Cather's life addresses its concern with the meaning of art. It has often been observed that Cather's later work, in contrast to *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918), reflects a more doubtful vision of the individual artist's power to overcome external constraints. This shift is sometimes traced to the negative critical reception of *One of Ours* (1922) and sometimes to her anxious response to the marriage in 1915 of Isabelle McClung, her patron and the object of her affections.[3] This commentary has, however, tended to treat the problem of art too strictly in the context of Cather's biography, such that *A Lost Lady* is understood primarily as her attempt to work through her psychosexual dilemmas with respect to her artistic vocation. Thus her emphasis on "the thing not named" in the "The Novel Démeublé" (50), her assertion that "the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts" (*Not Under Forty,* v), and her denunciations of materialism appear as so many displacements of her repressed desires.[4] In many cases this critical impulse has been driven by a legitimate attempt to place Cather in a marginalized tradition of lesbian feminist writing, even as the resistance of her work to these efforts has been noted in turn. Sometimes, however, critics have diagnosed Cather's aesthetic as a private, individual means of expressing her insecurities in the face of a world that she could not accept. Demaree C. Peck's claim that Niel Herbert represents a projection of Cather's frustrated erotic and artistic impulses may serve as a case in point. Noting that the author "invents her materialistic

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villains as scapegoats on whom she can blame the failure of her dreams of imaginative possession" (163), Peck draws on the McClung thesis in order to argue that the novel fails to achieve ironic distance from Niel: "While Niel's preadolescent idealism may make him seem unreliable to the reader, Cather does not make him the target of her irony" (168).[5] In reducing Cather's aesthetic to purely personal terms, such an argument prematurely attributes a fixed, one-dimensional perspective to the novel.

While considering Cather's artistic vision in relation to gender politics has helped to culturally situate her work, an overemphasis on biography risks distorting the work in order to portray the artist. One may certainly acknowledge the influence of Cather's personal experience on her writing; however, it is no less important to consider her aesthetic as something more than a by-product of her vexed personal life.

As Susan J. Rosowski has argued in *The Voyage Perilous,* Cather's work developed out of a romantic literary tradition largely inherited from the prominent nineteenth-century British poets. Rosowski traces this romantic sensibility in Cather's work primarily in terms of its emphasis on the imagination as a privileged medium of reconciling the human mind with the external world. In response to a scientific rationality that retains an essential dualism between subject and object, she argues, Cather's artist seeks to overcome this dualism through the "sympathetic imagination" (9). In the case of *A Lost Lady,* however, Rosowski observes that this impulse confronts its own limitations, so that Cather's "carefully modulated romantic prose poem" (xii) now assimilates the *failure* of the sympathetic imagination to fulfill its longing for unity: "In it, as in a Keatsian ode, subject and object engage in dialectic movement, with moments of wholeness followed by separation, of illusion followed by disappointment."[6] In contrast to the earlier works, then, *A Lost Lady* represents Cather's more pronounced awareness of the persistent gap between subjective mind and objective world; the novel thus exemplifies the more ambiguous, self-conscious concern with romantic illusion that one may already see in *One of Ours* as well as such subsequent novels as *The Professor's House* (1925) and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927).

If this romantic tradition may also be understood as a response to the expansion of capitalism, Cather also inherited its guiding principle of aesthetic autonomy as an essential quality of literary creation. By *aesthetic autonomy* I refer not only to the sovereignty of the individual imagination but also to the corresponding idea (inherited from Kantian aesthetics) that

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a literary artifact has value only insofar as it is not tainted by the external "interest" of economic profit or commercial exchange. Instead, this view perceives an artifact as governed only through its formal properties, through its unique expression of an immanent, carefully refined beauty that transcends any determinate social purpose that one might ascribe to it. Rather than merely representing the world "as it is" in the prosaic fashion of literary realism or naturalism, autonomous artworks aspire toward a separate domain of cultural value that exists primarily for its own ends.[7]

This generalized sense of the aesthetic as an autonomous sphere of cultural value remains an essential legacy of postromantic art and receives some of its most notable, if variously inflected, expressions in the writings of Arnold, Ruskin, and Pater—all of whom were figures in Cather's reading.[8] Her appreciation of Flaubert and Henry James, as well as her aversion to naturalistic models of writing, also places Cather very strongly within this cultural current.[9] It is perhaps in her essay "On the Art of Fiction" that she articulates this aesthetic ethos most explicitly:

> Writing ought either to be the manufacture of stories for which there is a market demand—a business as safe and commendable as making soap or breakfast foods—or it should be an art, which is always a search for something for which there is no market demand, something new and untried, where the values are intrinsic and have nothing to do with standardized values. (103)

Here the distinction between art and commerce is understood as categorical. In her concept of the novel *démeublé* (unfurnished novel) Cather translated this cultural attitude into an ideal of stylistic restraint, authorial impersonality, and an emphasis on implied meaning rather than an accumulation of realistic detail.[10] As for the romantics, art for Cather offered an antidote to the disenchanted, materialistic world of industrialism and commerce; at the same time, her later experiments with narrative form would eventually develop and question the tradition she inherited, thereby overlapping with a more modernist sensibility.[11]

Andreas Huyssen offers an especially relevant account of this cultural paradigm of art. For Huyssen, the modernist art and literary movements of the early twentieth century largely articulated themselves through a rhetoric of the "Great Divide," which he defines as "the kind of discourse which insists upon the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture" (viii). Yet such a "conscious strategy of exclusion" and "anxiety of

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contamination" in modernism does not originate in the early twentieth century; instead, Huyssen regards it as a further development of issues that had already informed artistic and literary practices in the late nineteenth century, most explicitly in the *art pour l'art* tradition (vii). Consequently, the most fundamental idea that modernism inherits from the previous century is that of the autonomous artwork:

> Only by fortifying its boundaries, by maintaining its purity and autonomy, and by avoiding any contamination with mass culture and the signifying systems of everyday life can the art work maintain its adversary stance: adversary to the bourgeois culture of everyday life as well as adversary to mass culture and entertainment which are seen as the primary forms of bourgeois cultural articulation. (54)

In his account Huyssen emphasizes how a putatively inherent aesthetic value is always to some degree a reactionary symptom in the face of socioeconomic change.[12] In doing so, he echoes a familiar Marxian critique of aesthetic autonomy:

> The irony of course is that art's aspirations to autonomy, its uncoupling from church and state, became possible only when literature, painting, and music were first organized according to the principles of a market economy. From its beginnings the autonomy of art has been related dialectically to the commodity form. (17)

In its historical emergence, the concept of autonomous art is therefore both opposed to and complicit with a predominant realm of commodity exchange. The notion of autonomous art, as a form of abstract value existing for its own sake, at once separates art from a world of commerce and at the same time mimics the qualities of the commodity fetish as described by Marx: a seemingly isolated object of immanent value that masks its prior determination within a nexus of unequal social relations.[13] As Terry Eagleton has noted, the dynamic of "the commodity as fetish resisting the commodity as exchange" ("Capitalism" 67) may thus be seen as a dynamic in modern art.[14]

While countless writers of her time also conceived of art as autonomous, Cather's investment in this conception contributed to her condemnation by the social critics of the 1930s, who argued that her writing was too rooted within a genteel tradition of literature:

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> Miss Cather has never once tried to see contemporary life as it is; she sees only that it lacks what the past, at least her idealization of it, had. Thus she has been barred from the task that has occupied most of the world's great artists, the expression of what is central and fundamental to her own age. (Hicks 144)

That a popular writer of commercially successful fiction would denounce the vulgarity of modern society appeared to be more a symptom of bad faith than a clearly defined cultural vision, and the pointed criticisms of Granville Hicks and Lionel Trilling were echoed by a later generation of critics. Meanwhile, as Cather responded to such criticism with a strident defense of art as an apolitical pursuit ("Escapism," 1936), this only seemed to give further credence to the image of her as a recalcitrant romantic who refused to engage with the social problems of modern life. As Deborah Carlin has argued, this evaluation of Cather has remained a commonplace in the criticism, especially in critical judgments of the novels that follow *One of Ours* (17).[15]

Yet the value of art in an industrial age is a problem that informs Cather's fiction in a much more complex fashion than was acknowledged by either her early critics or her response to them. In *A Lost Lady* Neil Herbert's narration already internalizes the tension between art as a self-contained object and as a socially mediated form. Through Niel, Cather incorporates her own concern with art as a thematic dimension of the book, yet in such a way that his experience also registers the inherent contradictions that Huyssen and other critics have traced in the concept of autonomous art. Just as one reads the novel both through and against Niel's vantage point, then, it is important to read it both through and against the concept of art that Cather received from her precursors. To do so allows for a much greater understanding of how the novel addresses the problem of aesthetic value in modern culture.

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As noted by David Stouck (*Imagination* 59–60), the role of Niel Herbert originated in Cather's attempt to resolve a stylistic issue. Having planned initially to write *A Lost Lady* in Niel's first-person voice, Cather subsequently decided to adopt a double perspective using both Neil's point of view and that of a third-person narrator. Such an approach, she thought, would allow her to convey Marian Forrester's qualities through their im-

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pact on another character's sensibility.[16] Rather than limiting her focus to Niel's subjective standpoint or providing a relatively objective depiction of Marian via third-person omniscient narration, Cather situates the reader between these two angles of vision. In this way she departs from the personalized lyricism of *My Ántonia* for the sort of modulated perspective that characterizes Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* and the "impressionistic" style of narration she admired in Henry James.[17] Yet precisely because this method establishes a measure of distance between the reader and Niel, it has raised interpretative questions regarding his motives. However one-dimensional he may seem initially, Niel's fluctuating vision reveals his highly ambiguous relationship with Marian, one that manifests both his own inner conflicts and his anxious response to a rapidly changing world. Niel thus functions as more than a mere narrative device: as the novel progresses, his romanticized standpoint demands substantive judgment from the reader.

Broadly speaking, Niel Herbert's development may be traced through three overlapping dimensions—the psychosexual, the sociohistorical, and the aesthetic. Corresponding to these are the three major roles that Niel's lost lady plays (and fails to play) in his imagination: Marian as maternal figure, Marian as emblem of a mythic frontier aristocracy, and Marian as self-contained object of beauty. Psychologically, *A Lost Lady* provides a highly nuanced depiction of Niel's uneasy initiation into the world of adult sexuality; read through this lens, the significance of the novel is rooted primarily in the individual ego of its male protagonist. Yet insofar as Niel's experience is also situated in the context of social transformation in the West, the "reality principle" that confronts him also involves an expanding sphere of industrialization and commercialism. In this light, Niel's troubled vision thus allows the novel to articulate a melancholic allegory of historical change: the passing of a previous, heroic era of Western settlement in the face of capitalistic "progress." Finally, as a figure of the artist manqué, alienated from a world that violates his fantasies, Niel's particular form of *bovaryisme* introduces the thematic problem of truth and illusion in aesthetic experience. Through this lens, the novel may be read as a meditation on the meaning and value of art in a modern age.

While the last dimension is what concerns us here, it cannot be considered in strict isolation from the other two. Rather, these three dimensions operate within a comprehensive, dialectical structure in the novel, whereby Niel's view of Marian Forrester as objet d'art entails a failed

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attempt to contain the psychological and socioeconomic contradictions that he cannot resolve. His sexual neuroses and social perception thus not only serve as interpretive focal points but also provide the context for a complex genealogy of artistic consciousness—a genealogy that ultimately reflects on the status of the novel itself as an autonomous cultural artifact. A closer look at this dynamic reveals how Niel's aesthetic disillusionment serves as a necessary component of Cather's double perspective in the novel.

Niel's adolescent relationship with the Forresters, as Kathleen L. Nichols suggests, offers a variant of the Freudian "family romance": having suffered the loss of his mother as a child, Niel perceives Marian as a surrogate mother as well as a forbidden object of desire.[18] The episode of Niel's fall from a tree on the Forrester property gives the first hint of this. Recovering from the fall in her bed, he responds to Marian's care with a nascent sense of sexual attraction:

> What soft fingers Mrs. Forrester had, and what a lovely lady she was. Inside the lace ruffle of her dress he saw her white throat rising and falling so quickly. . . . The little boy was thinking that he would probably never be in so nice a place again. (26)

As she caresses his hair and kisses him on the forehead, Niel thinks: "Oh, how sweet, how sweet she smelled!" As the boy grows older, his view of her often suggests that of the faithful courtier: "Compared to her, other women were heavy and lifeless,—they had not that something in their glance that made one's blood tingle" (39). Through such responses, Niel's sense of Marian suggests a conflict between his erotic desire and filial love. As Nichols has observed,

> The problem that Niel eventually will have to solve is how to retain the moment of sexual "innocence" in Marian's bed—how to keep his own sexual development from upsetting the balance between his need for the restored maternal figure and his growing attraction for the sexual woman. (189)

In the classic Oedipal paradigm, rather than supplanting the father as an erotic rival, the male child must emulate him as a symbolic figure of patriarchal law; in turn, the child must eventually transfer his desire away from the mother to other female figures. In his esteem for the elderly Captain Forrester, who appears as a distinctly nonsexual surrogate father,

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Niel only partially achieves this psychic shift. In his visits to the Forrester home Niel repeatedly marvels at the Captain's decorum at the dinner table and his reverence for his wife. Through his unyielding social rituals, Captain Forrester appears as a venerable figure of innate paternal authority. At the same time, though, Marian continues to predominate in Niel's reveries, so that he must justify his admiration:

> Curiously enough, it was as Captain Forrester's wife that she most interested Niel, and it was in her relation to her husband that he most admired her. Given her other charming attributes, her comprehension of a man like the railroad-builder, her loyalty to him, stamped her more than anything else. That, he felt, was quality; something that could never become worn or shabby; steel of Damascus. His admiration of Mrs. Forrester went back to that, just as, he felt, she herself went back to it. He rather liked the stories, even the spiteful ones, about the gay life she led in Colorado, and the young men she kept dangling about her every winter. He sometimes thought of the life she might have been living ever since he had known her,—and the one she had chosen to live. From that disparity, he believed, came the subtlest thrill of her fascination. She mocked outrageously at the proprieties she observed, and inherited the magic of contradictions. (75)

The "magic of contradictions" that Marian "inherits" here says considerably more about Niel's perception than it does about her innate qualities. On the one hand, Niel transforms Marian into an ideal of loyalty by subordinating her role to that of the symbolic father, a move that allows him to withdraw her from any context of illicit sexuality; in this way, both her virtue and his chaste intentions are mutually affirmed. On the other hand, this ideal involves a curious fantasy projection: by summoning and abolishing her past lovers, and by associating the Captain with an asexual sense of propriety, Niel still struggles to manage his own lingering desire for Marian. Rather than acknowledging this desire directly, he transforms it into a vicarious "thrill" that affirms and cancels her sexuality in the same gesture.

The psychological conflict that conditions Niel's perception of Marian is itself informed by her role in the social framework of Sweet Water, and thus a psychosexual reading of Niel's "lost lady" raises socioeconomic

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issues as well. Marian appears not only as a maternal figure for Niel but also as the feminine icon of a refined, noble class of independent landowners who have settled the West. Her pseudoaristocratic status allows her to represent the social antithesis of a venal class of middle-class professionals most clearly personified for Niel by Ivy Peters. Thus one finds a strong element of historical romance in Niel's melancholy musings:

> The Old West had been settled by dreamers, great-hearted adventurers who were unpractical to the point of magnificence; a courteous brotherhood, strong in attack but weak in defence, who could conquer but could not hold. Now all the vast territory they had won was to be at the mercy of men like Ivy Peters, who had never dared anything, never risked anything. They would drink up the mirage, dispel the morning freshness, root out the great brooding spirit of freedom, the generous, easy life of the great land-holders. The space, the colour, the princely carelessness of the pioneer they would destroy and cut up into profitable bits, as the match factory splinters the primeval forest. All the way from Missouri to the mountains this generation of shrewd young men, trained to petty economies by hard times, would do exactly what Ivy Peters had done when he drained the Forrester marsh. (102)

Of course, Captain Forrester had already displaced the Native Americans, and his expansion of the railroad had already opened the frontier to the commercial development of Ivy Peters.[19] Yet for Niel, frontier myth filters out such historical considerations and allows him to perceive the Captain and Marian as the "feudal" lord and lady of an idealized precapitalist social order.

However, since Niel cannot fully put himself in his aristocratic fantasy, he faces a dilemma somewhat analogous to the Oedipal scenario. For in spite of his loyalty to the Forresters, he is destined to be a member of the same younger generation of middle-class professionals that will eventually supplant them; Captain Forrester, the figurehead of a dying age, clearly cannot provide a model for Niel to emulate in his adult life. The psychosexual conflict that informs Niel's perception of the Forresters is compounded by class conflict, and neither can be resolved on its own terms in his experience. Just as Niel continues to disavow his lingering desire for Marian by conceiving her as an asexual model of fidelity, he must

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also disavow his own position in a changing class structure by valorizing her social standing in Sweet Water. And it is in the intersection of these conflicts that Niel's aesthetic vision of Marian develops. Unable to take the Captain's place as her loyal husband or her feudal lord, Niel situates himself as Marian's devoted witness, such that she becomes a cherished object of beauty that he seeks to protect from contamination.

Throughout the novel, Niel's vision of Marian is conveyed through a network of figurative associations (the imagery of flowers, the recurrent leitmotif of her laughter) and through small, still moments of heightened apprehension:

> She stood beside his desk in her long sealskin coat and cap, a crimson scarf showing around the collar, a little brown veil with spots tied over her eyes. The veil did not in the least obscure those beautiful eyes, dark and full of light, set under a low white forehead and arching eyebrows. The frosty air had brought no colour to her cheeks,—her skin had always the fragrant, crystalline whiteness of white lilacs. Mrs. Forrester looked at one, and one knew that she was bewitching. It was instantaneous, and it pierced the thickest hide. . . . Something about her took hold of one in a flash; one became acutely conscious of her, of her fragility and grace, of her mouth which could say so much without words; of her eyes, lively, laughing, intimate, nearly always a little mocking. (33)

In such epiphanies, the elements of adolescent longing and aristocratic fantasy in Niel's mind are sublimated into the stylized, straining rhetoric of aesthetic contemplation. While Marian's mixed role as Oedipal mother and genteel lady is still indirectly evoked, here the language projects her beauty as a self-contained essence—a magical aura that surrounds and protects her like the tantalizing veil that covers her face. Yet in the image of the veil and the slightly "mocking" quality of her eyes one may detect in Niel's perception an ambiguous undercurrent that appears intensified through his inability to see her fully. Such muted, Flaubertian irony may similarly be noted when Niel visits Marian after his first year of college:

> He approached quietly and was just wondering if she were asleep, when he heard a soft, delighted laugh, and with a quick movement she threw off the lace hat through which she had

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> been watching him. He stepped forward and caught her figure, hammock and all, in his arms. How light and alive she was! Like a bird caught in a net. If only he could rescue her and carry her off like this,—off the earth of sad, inevitable periods, away from age, weariness, adverse fortune!
>
> She showed no impatience to be released, but lay laughing up at him with that gleam of something elegantly wild, something fantastic and tantalizing,—seemingly so artless, really the most finished artifice! (104–05)

As conveyed in his gestures, Niel's wish to rescue Marian from a world of change reflects his unacknowledged desire to possess her. At the same time, the brief moment of intimacy he feels is punctuated by his sense of her as an "artless artifice," which situates her both within and beyond his grasp. It is as if, by conceiving of her in aesthetic terms, Niel can possess her most fully by not possessing her, understand her most fully by not understanding her. Thus while Niel's distinction between the "artless" and "artificial" suggests his genuine understanding of Marian, his reversal of terms—whereby her artless quality is conceived in terms of appearance and her artificial quality is conceived in terms of reality—obscures this distinction. As a "true illusion," Marian effectively becomes an object of aesthetic value for Niel, a creation of his own mystified contemplation.

Niel's discovery of literature in his uncle's study dramatizes his initiation into the world of art and provides a revealing backdrop to his idolization of Marian. Preferring novels to philosophy, Niel finds imaginative delight in reading Fielding, Goethe, Montaigne, and Ovid:

> He was eavesdropping upon the past, being let into the great world that had plunged and glittered and sumptuously sinned long before little Western towns were dreamed of. Those rapt evenings beside the lamp gave him a long perspective, influenced his conceptions of the people about him, made him know just what he wished his own relations with these people to be. (79)

Like his visits to the Forrester household, Niel's love of literature serves as an escape from his mundane family environment and the drudgery of his legal studies, allowing him to transform his present experience through the lens of past ideals. Yet his response to literature remains anachronistic—as if one could directly transpose the social values of the past to the present—suggesting the futility of his cultural nostalgia. If such

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reading informs his sense of the present, it remains all the more detached from his lived existence, so that he experiences literature as a guilty form of private wish fulfillment: he lives a "double life, with all its guilty enjoyments" (77). The "long perspective" that he gains is tempered by his awareness of how his reading remains isolated, subjectively cut off from the world around him.[20]

In this regard Niel's bad faith toward literature reflects the historical problem of art that has been traced by Huyssen and others. To some extent, Niel's sense of literature as an unprofitable indulgence is necessary if art is to function as an ideal refuge of beauty, removed from the practical world of work and money represented by his uncle's legal volumes and his father's work as a financial consultant. For Niel, as for the Victorian generation that precedes him, art promises something higher and nobler than material possession; like the undeveloped marshlands owned by the Captain, art retains an intrinsic cultural value that cannot be given a price. Yet Niel's furtive, guilty aestheticism all the more reveals the power of the socioeconomic world it holds at a remove. For the more that art remains separate from the practical realm, the more this separation reinforces a social division between work and leisure. Art becomes an object of consumption, as represented in Cousin Sophie's vulgar reading at the kitchen table. Here the question of art is not solely rooted in Niel's personal limitations; within the context of social history, this question is informed by the antagonistic interdependence of art and a broader commodification of culture.

This dynamic has been explored by Theodor Adorno, whose diagnosis of aesthetic experience in relation to commodity culture illuminates Niel's view of literature as well as his relationship with Marian. Commenting on Kant's view that art must elicit disinterested pleasure, Adorno offers an ironic revision in light of modern capitalism: "If art is useless for the business of self-preservation—bourgeois society never quite forgives that—it should at least demonstrate a sort of use-value modeled on sensual pleasure." For Adorno the condition of aesthetic experience in modern capitalism compromises the capacity of art to offer a critical reflection of its surroundings and instead grants primacy to the very form of regressive pleasure that Kant sought to avoid:

> While the artwork's sensual appeal seemingly brings it closer to the consumer, it is alienated from him by being a commodity that he possesses and the loss of which he must constantly fear.

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> The false relation to art is akin to anxiety over possession. The fetishistic idea of the artwork as property that can be possessed and destroyed by reflection has its exact correlative in the idea of exploitable property within the psychological economy of the self. (13)

The possessive (mis)appropriation of art in this sense is neither a timeless philosophical problem nor a merely localized social phenomenon in modern culture; for Adorno, it is rather part of a broader historical tendency in which consumer-based criteria of value have come to serve as a predominant medium through which human nature and the individual self are perceived. If art is to be understood as a "true illusion," then, Adorno's analysis gives this formulation a critical turn: the false relation to art in modernity has its own moment of truth insofar as it serves as a negative reflection of how an expanding social world of commodity relations has begun to structure deeper levels of subjective experience. It is in this context, too, that Niel's experience of literature indeed shapes his conception of Marian.

Thus the possessiveness that Niel feels toward Marian's beauty goes hand in hand with his fear that she will barter herself off to philistines such as Frank Ellinger or Ivy Peters. Niel is aware of Ellinger's previous affair with a prostitute (Nell Emerald), which links the older man's erotic vitality with sexual commodification. When Niel discovers Marian's affair with Ellinger, his inability to accept her sexuality also entails his vague sense that she has allowed herself to be exploited by a "coarse worldling" (81); by consorting with Ellinger, she has essentially become an object for his opportunistic desires. After hearing their laughter outside Marian's bedroom window, Niel struggles to understand:

> Grace, variety, the lovely voice, the sparkle of fun and fancy in those dark eyes; all this was nothing. It was not a moral scruple she had outraged, but an aesthetic ideal. Beautiful women, whose beauty meant more than it said . . . was their brilliancy always fed by something coarse and concealed? (83)

In the case of Ivy Peters, a more overt conflation of adult sexuality and economic exploitation characterizes his relationship with Marian. After the financial decline of the Forrester estate, Peters buys the lease for the property, drains the marshlands, conducts Marian's finances, and soon begins to make crude advances toward her. Niel tries to intervene, but

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Marian insists that he avoid doing so; she similarly declines his offer to help her manage her business affairs: "But, my dear boy, you know nothing about these business schemes. You're not clever that way,—it's one of the things I love you for" (118). If Niel perceives Ellinger and Peters as symbolic rivals for his lady's affections, the businessman and lawyer also embody an economic world in which everything, even Marian's inestimable beauty, eventually has its price.

In one sense, Niel's need to protect Marian thus represents a figurative wish to remove her from erotic *and* economic circulation—to prevent her from becoming either exchanged or consumed as an object of desire. In this scenario, sexual contamination and commodification appear as mutually reinforcing tropes and indicate a volatile intersection of the psychological and socioeconomic codes that I have previously traced in Niel's consciousness. Just as Marian's removal from the restricted economy of the Forrester marriage entails his loss of her as a maternal substitute, her removal from the restricted economy of the Forrester estate entails his loss of her as aristocratic icon. While Niel cannot directly situate himself in either of these economies, their apparent stability still allows him to conceptualize Marian's beauty as a self-contained value, and thereby to manage his own conflicted sexual and social relationship with her: Niel's disinterested aesthetic stance toward Marian serves as both a cancellation and an indirect extension of his own vested interests.[21] The expression of interest by Ellinger and Peters, however, threatens to undermine this stance by resituating Marian in a modern sexual and financial economy, where her qualitative value ("That, he felt, was quality; something that could never become worn or shabby" [75]) will be effectively liquidated.

As one may see in his epiphanies, however, Neil's image of Marian also remains dehumanizing in its own right, insofar as it projects her beauty in symbolic terms that fail to acknowledge her agency. Notwithstanding his sense of her distinctive charms, his perception of her is fundamentally static, disembodied, carefully confined within the realm of his passive contemplation. Thus Niel's aesthetic sensibility hollows out the beauty that it seeks to protect: for the more rigorously he conceives of her beauty as a self-contained essence, the more he transforms it into an abstract form that lacks any substantial content in Marian's person. At the same time, Niel's formalized vision ends up perceiving her beauty as *its own* content, such that it also appears as a detachable thing that Marian owns and can give to him:

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> He burned to ask her one question, to get the truth out of her and set his mind at rest: What did she do with all her exquisiteness when she was with a man like Ellinger? Where did she put it away? And having put it away, how could she recover herself, and give one—give even him—the sense of tempered steel, a blade that could fence with anyone and never break? (95)

Such an unresolved question testifies not only to his confusion regarding Marian's sexuality but also to how his sacrosanct veneration of her beauty has transformed it into a cultural fetish.[22] While Niel situates himself in opposition to the predatory, philistine mentality he sees in Ellinger, his own vacillating vision of Marian has already begun to manifest the split that Adorno describes in his discussion of the commodity character of art in modernity:

> For a society in which art no longer has a place and which is pathological in all its reactions to it, art fragments on the one hand into a reified, hardened cultural possession and on the other hand into a source of pleasure that the customer pockets and that for the most part has little to do with the object itself. . . . The poles of the artwork's deaestheticization are that it is made as much a thing among things as a psychological vehicle of the spectator. What the reified artworks are no longer able to say is replaced by the beholder with the standardized echo of himself, to which he hearkens. (15)

What for Adorno is the result of a long process of socioeconomic history—the detachment of art from political and religious institutions and its reintegration in a framework of commodity exchange—is recapitulated on a smaller scale in Neil's troubled vision of Marian Forrester, whose beauty consequently appears as both an inherent value and an exchangeable value, an exquisite essence and a detachable thing, a radiance and a mirror of his own projections.

Niel's cult of beauty also remains part of a broader network in which Marian is a focus of the conflicting "investments" of a masculine social order, and it is in this network that her fluctuating value as both cultural fetish and economic commodity becomes developed most clearly.[23] For the Captain, Marian's value resides in her role as a marker of his own social status in the community:

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> "When I came here as a young man, I had it planned in my mind, pretty much as it is today; where I would dig my well, and where I would plant my grove and my orchard. I planned to build a house that my friends would come to, with a wife like Mrs. Forrester to make it attractive to them." (50–51)

If the Captain's love for his wife is sincere, it also appears as an indirect extension of his paternalistic ownership of property:

> Her husband had archaic ideas about jewels; a man bought them for his wife in acknowledgment of things he could not gracefully utter. They must be costly; they must show that he was able to buy them, and that she was worthy to wear them. (49)

In the Captain's "archaic" value system, the financial worth of the jewels must be secondary to their iconic significance as a token of his esteem; at the same time, their iconic value must be rooted in their financial value in order that they might express Marian's worth as well as his own ability to purchase them. As the jewels thus signify an uneasy mixture of sentiment and proprietorship, they become metonymically associated with Marian's own ambiguous value in the Forrester marriage. Meanwhile, for Frank Ellinger, Marian is a potential source of wealth until her value diminishes after the bank failure. His previous respect for her cultural status remains the shallow façade of a gambler who hedges his bets, and he eventually opts for a more profitable marriage with someone else. Finally, for Ivy Peters, whose pleasure in the declining fortunes of the Forresters expresses all the unfettered resentment of a rising business class ("The Forresters have come down in the world like the rest" [100]), his affair with Marian becomes a direct, callous extension of his commercial appropriation of the Forrester land.

As his lady becomes exchanged among these different men, Niel witnesses the steady erosion of his aesthetic ideal. Marian's private significance in Niel's imagination becomes compromised, as he cannot prevent her from becoming socially and sexually redefined by others. Thus the role of Ellinger and Peters as third parties in Niel's relationship with Marian also extends to larger segments of Sweet Water society, who represent the intrusion of a vulgar, middle-class milieu within the previously restricted cultural space of the Forrester household. The first sign of this appears in the scene of Marian's anguished phone call to Ellinger

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after his marriage; in the midst of her repudiation of Ellinger, Niel cuts the phone cord due to his fear that her conversation will be overheard by the operator. However, his attempt to protect Marian's reputation comes too late, and her affair "circulates" through the gossip of the local townswomen. Shortly thereafter, the same townswomen appear as a horde of economic speculators in the Forrester home:

> The Mrs. Beardsleys and Molly Tuckers had their chance at last. They went in and out of Mrs. Forrester's kitchen as they did out of one another's. They rummaged through the linen to find more sheets, pried about in the attic and the cellar. They went over the house like ants, the house where they had never before got past the parlour; and they found they had been fooled all these years. There was nothing remarkable about the place at all!
> (118)

The demystification of Mrs. Forrester's private space continues as Niel overhears the women repeatedly evaluating the items of the house, already anticipating their sale after the Captain's death:

> "Why didn't she sell some of that silver? All those platters and covered dishes stuck away with the tarnish of years on them!"
> "I wouldn't mind having some of her linen. There's a chest full of double damask upstairs, every tablecloth long enough to make two. Did you ever see anything like the wine glasses! . . . If she has a sale after he's gone, I'll buy a dozen champagne glasses."
> (133)

For Niel, such accoutrements are symbolic tokens of Marian's idealized grace; for the townswomen, their value is primarily defined in practical terms, as mere possessions that they may appropriate at a bargain price.

Niel's final moment of disillusionment comes when he witnesses Ivy Peters casually embracing his lost lady, a brief scene that appropriately parallels his previous eavesdropping on Marian and Ellinger:

> It happened like this,—had scarcely the dignity of an episode. It was nothing, and yet it was everything. Going over to see her one summer evening, he stopped a moment by the dining-room window to look at the honeysuckle. The dining-room door was open into the kitchen, and there Mrs. Forrester stood at a table, making pastry. Ivy Peters came in at the kitchen door, walked up

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> behind her, and unconcernedly put both arms around her, his hands meeting over her breast. She did not move, did not look up, but went on rolling the pastry. (161)

That this curiously anticlimactic moment can have such decisive significance is fitting, for in the course of the narrative Niel's vision of Marian has been revealed as a fragile wish that finds no support in the external world. Responding to this episode, Niel wishes Marian would "immolate herself . . . and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged," underscoring the violent undercurrent of his idealism as well as its contradictory quality. For in its extreme repudiation of a degraded, materialistic culture, Niel's devotion becomes expressed through the image of destroyed property; in imaginatively withdrawing Marian from circulation, and thereby preserving her symbolic value, he also defines her as a mere extension of the Forrester estate. Thus his rigid idealism ironically appears as the obverse mirror of Ivy Peters's crude materialism.

While Niel conceives of his final discovery as a cure for his youthful illusions, the nature of this cure remains complex. He has been forced to acknowledge Marian's sexuality, yet this understanding goes hand in hand with his belated acknowledgment of a world in which sexual relationships are mediated by economic necessity. The pointed irony of his final words, "At least she was well cared for," therefore qualifies the nature of his hard-won wisdom: having internalized the reality of adult sexuality, he has also internalized the reality of capitalism, whereby marriage relations—as one sees in the case of Marian and Captain Forrester—are fated to bear the mark of property relations. In this respect Niel's experience has taught him not only that one must "live life on any terms," but that such terms involve objective social constraints that ultimately have a profound bearing on that life.

On another level, however, it appears that Niel manages to keep his lost lady after all: "But eventually, after she had drifted out of his ken, when he did not know if Daniel Forrester's widow were living or dead, Daniel Forrester's wife returned to him, a bright, impersonal memory" (163). Having renounced Marian as an object of desire in the present, Niel is able to reappropriate her as a ghostly, remote image of human happiness, beyond the forces of time or change. Indeed, it is only after losing her—as maternal figure, as aristocratic lady, and as an object of beauty—that Niel can conceive of Marian all the more as an "impersonal" symbol, fully removed from a world that has failed to sustain his perception of

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her. In doing so, however, his vision remains divided between "Daniel Forrester's widow" and "Daniel Forrester's wife." Through such a divide, he can regard the former as someone who helped "break him in to life" while regarding the latter as promising a transcendent beauty that might compensate for such painful understanding:

> He came to be very glad that he had known her, and that she had had a hand in breaking him in to life. He has known pretty women and clever ones since then,—but never one like her, as she was in her best days. Her eyes, when they laughed for a moment into one's own, seemed to promise a wild delight that he has not found in life. "I know where it is," they seemed to say, "I could show you!" He would like to call up the shade of the young Mrs. Forrester, as the witch of Endor called up Samuel's, and challenge it, demand the secret of that ardour; ask her whether she had really found some ever-blooming, ever-burning, ever-piercing joy, or whether it was all fine play-acting. Probably she had found no more than another; but she had always the power of suggesting things much lovelier than herself, as the perfume of a single flower may call up the whole sweetness of spring. (163)

Niel's final anamnesis, as Rosowski has noted in *The Voyage Perilous,* recalls Wordsworth's notion of poetry as "experience recollected in tranquility" (129), and as Bloom observes, the phrase "some ever-blooming, ever-burning, ever-piercing joy" echoes Walter Pater's "gem-like flame" (5). Such a resurgence of Niel's aesthetic sensibility, however, does not resolve the tension in his perception so much as it rearticulates it at a deeper register of his consciousness. On the one hand, his wish to interrogate Marian's ghost suggests disappointment at the gap between this impersonal symbol and the person it evokes: he cannot escape the bitter sense that her grandeur was no more than "fine play-acting" well before she ever became involved with Ellinger or Peters. On the other hand, this gap is precisely what allows this symbol to suggest a larger, otherworldly realm of beauty that it cannot fully embody ("but she had always the power of suggesting things much lovelier than herself"). Despite his apparent resignation, Niel remains suspended between loss and longing on an even more introverted level than before.

By the end of the novel, Niel thus serves as a rather paradoxical fig-

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ure of aesthetic disenchantment. If Marian's absorption in a sex-money nexus leads to a dismantling of his idealism, it also allows her to return as a disembodied image in his memory. This return may suggest something that the reader has suspected all along: Marian has *always* served as an image of lost happiness for Niel, in spite of his futile attempts to rescue her from a vulgar world. Finally, however, his loss has become recognized as such; he cannot sustain the illusion that his image of Marian is founded on who she "really" is. Instead, once his relation to her has become sufficiently assimilated into a social order of patriarchal law and commodity exchange, he retains his lost lady as an abstract, desubstantialized symbol of beauty. He attempts to turn his very disillusionment into an aesthetic experience. In other words, he becomes a modernist.

§

In light of the issues traced above, we may now suggest how *A Lost Lady* compels further reassessment of Cather's cultural significance for contemporary readers, particularly with regard to her position in American modernism. The basic contention that Cather's fiction reflects her own psychological experience as well as her aversion to industrial modernity is inescapable. By the same token, this reflection arrives by way of an assortment of narrators that Cather criticism has understood in very different ways: once Cather appeared as the mouthpiece for a beleaguered, genteel regionalism; subsequently she was recuperated as a feminist or protofeminist author; then she was criticized by lesbian-feminist critics for masking her own homoerotic desires through heterosexual male characters.[24] *A Lost Lady* can be read in all of these ways, depending on the degree to which the reader identifies the author with its male protagonist. Deborah Carlin's judgment regarding the late novels therefore applies to this one as well:

> At the same time that the texts elicit certain readings by trying to enclose the story within a traditional ending, they inevitably confound the reader's ability to affix an order or a meaning by incorporating within the narrative a multiplicity of contradictory perspectives and interpretations. (25)

This multiplicity of perspectives, particularly toward art, suggests the significance of her work within the context of literary modernism. As I

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have argued, the method of narration in *A Lost Lady* helps construct an allegory of art in a social order based on commodity exchange. While Niel Herbert's conflicted vision reflects Cather's cultural dilemma as an artist, it also allows the narrative to represent this dilemma at a more complex, meta-aesthetic level: the inherent problem of art that informs the novel thus appears as a theme within the novel, as it is played out through the struggles of its troubled protagonist. Likewise, the modulation of the narrative voice, as it moves within and beyond Niel's point of view, establishes sufficient distance from his idealism while still allowing him to provide a medium of intense aesthetic experience. In effect, Cather provides a way for the problem of art and commodification to be structurally managed in her narrative, even as it mimics the perceptual conflicts of her protagonist.

In considering this approach to narrative in *A Lost Lady,* then, we may answer a recurrent question of Cather criticism—was she a failed romantic or a modernist?—by positing that these impulses are closely interrelated, insofar as they both emerge from the fundamental problem of aesthetic value. That is, if Cather projects a romantic viewpoint through Niel Herbert while also critically distancing the reader from such a viewpoint through a modernist manipulation of perspective, this tension expresses the sociocultural conflict that already determines the novel as an autonomous artifact. For in rehearsing his fall from innocence to experience, *A Lost Lady* also suggests that Niel's aesthetic vision of Marian Forrester remains illusory precisely because of his blindness to socioeconomic realities. This suggestion constitutes what may be termed the realistic layer of the novel: the implicit recognition that in a modern social world governed by commodity production, art can only provide a semblance of autonomous value. Yet at the same time, in keeping with Cather's aversion to literary realism and commerce, the novel does not simply renounce the viewpoint of its young artist figure. Instead, Cather's bifocal point of view serves a twofold function: to disavow Niel's romantic aesthetic and to reconfigure it in a more sophisticated, self-conscious modernist style.

These aspects of the novel may have all the more significance in light of Cather's professional career as a magazine writer. As M. Catherine Downs has argued (64–87), Cather's ability to adopt different narrative personae in her fiction was significantly informed by her earlier journalistic writings, in which she adopted pseudonyms such as Helen Delay and

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Henry Nicklemann in order to navigate between a feminized domestic sphere and a masculinized professional sphere in her audience appeal. At the same time, as Sharon O'Brien has noted (*Emerging Voice* 288–302), Cather grew much more ambivalent about her magazine work as she began to pursue her vocation as a fiction writer. Her tenure at *McClure's* in particular became difficult because S. S. McClure wanted to refashion her as a profitable "muckraking" successor to Ida Tarbell just when she became strongly influenced by the aesthetic refinements of Henry James's fiction. If Cather's early work as a journalist was crucial to her economic autonomy as a woman and vital to the cultivation of her early skills as a writer, she eventually saw it as a threat to her artistic autonomy as a writer of literary fiction. It may thus not be surprising that the same author who claimed that writing "has to be gone at like any other trade" (Bohlke 14) would also condemn journalism as the "vandalism of literature" (Curtin 1: 272) because it "has made art a trade"; it was precisely because Cather herself was so well-grounded in the business of marketing fiction that she felt compelled to defend an autonomous ideal of art even as her awareness of economic realities would have compelled her to recognize the limits of such an ideal. In this regard the modernist irony that Cather began to cultivate in her journalistic adoption of different narrative personae may have its complement in the author's ironic awareness regarding the fate of the modern writer in the marketplace: "Well we, most of us, start out to write epics and end by writing advertisements" (Curtin 2: 722).

By incorporating aesthetic disenchantment in her own ambiguous mode of narration, Cather not only participates in the modernist critique of illusion that informs the work of writers such as Flaubert, James, and Conrad, but also addresses how the problem of artistic illusion is itself symptomatic of the uneasy relationship between autonomous art and commerce in industrialized modernity. In this sense *A Lost Lady* may be considered not only a modernist novel but also a re-enactment of the cultural conflict through which literary modernism emerged as an aesthetic paradigm for authors and critics in post–World War I America.

Notes

1. Susan J. Rosowski ("Willa Cather's Women"), Jennifer Bailey, and Anneliese Smith have offered feminist readings that similarly emphasize Neil's limited perspective on Marian Forrester and provide alternative assessments of her role

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in the novel. For further considerations of Cather's feminist themes in *A Lost Lady*, also see Diane Cousineau and Nancy Morrow, both of whose articles appear in the same issue of *Women's Studies*. Deborah Carlin offers a broader survey of feminist criticism on Cather, whereas Joan Acocella gives a critique of feminist approaches to the author.

2. Both Urgo and Schwartz draw on the work of Richard Slotkin, whose influential study of frontier myth in the industrialization period of American history situates mythic plotting as a means of justifying present social structures. While my reading does not fully address the ramifications of Niel's "feudal myth," the arguments of Urgo and Schwartz are not inconsistent with my own. Janis P. Stout also addresses the problem of historical perspective in the novel, with some discussion of Cather's critical attitude toward materialism (188–200).

3. Although there is no disagreement about the role of Lyra Garber as the historical reference for Marian Forrester, Leon Edel's claim that Isabelle McClung served as another "lost lady" in the author's personal life has given another dimension to the book as an expression of personal and artistic crisis. For information about the role of Lyra Garber as the prototype for Marian Forrester, see 193–202 in Rosowski's historical essay. With regard to Isabelle McClung, Leon Edel develops his psychobiographic argument in an interpretation of *The Professor's House*.

4. See Sharon O'Brien, "'The Thing Not Named'" 576, 577.

5. Peck's identification of Niel with the author follows Philip Gerber (111). This identification is too simple, but Peck's reassessment of the "selfless idealist" / "selfish materialist" (162) dichotomy in Cather's fiction is important to my argument:

> Cather's artist-claimants themselves have a stake in the world, and in many ways they appear as self-interested as their materialist antagonists. . . . Whereas the commercial degenerate is portrayed as wanting to hoard material or physical things—land, houses, jewelry, a woman's body—the artist-claimant greedily tries to appropriate the very genius of the land or the very consciousness of other people as a mirror to the self.

Insofar as Niel's vision of Marian appears both as a sublimated desire to possess her and a desire to remove her from the sexual/economic "possession" of others, Peck's account is valid (see also note 23). I would only add that the significance of this tension does not lie primarily in the author's biography. Rather, this aspect of Niel's experience reflects a cultural dilemma: the contradictory value of art in a capitalist economy.

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6. Rosowski regards this dialectic between illusion and disillusionment as already inherent in the romantic tradition, whereas Stouck's reading of the novel as a "pastoral of experience" (*Willa Cather's Imagination* 58) emphasizes a dialectic between romantic and antiromantic/realistic impulses in the book. While both of their arguments do justice to the aesthetic tensions in the novel, I have tried to stratify this dialectic on three narrative levels (the psychological, the socioeconomic, and the aesthetic) in order to highlight the relationship between aesthetic and psychosocial tensions in the book. In this approach I am indebted to Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious.*

7. The following passage in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* may serve to illustrate this aspect of autonomous art:

> Fine art must be free art in a double sense: it must be free in the sense of not being a mercenary occupation and hence a kind of labor, whose magnitude can be judged, exacted, or paid for according to a determinate standard; but fine art must also be free in the sense that, though the mind is occupying itself, yet it feels satisfied and aroused (independently of any pay) without looking to some other purpose. (190)

For a Marxist critique of Kant's concept of autonomous art, see Terry Eagleton, *Ideology* 70–101. Theodor W. Adorno's critical comparison between Kantian and Freudian sublimation, as well as his consideration of the problem of the commodity (8–18), are also particularly relevant for my reading of Cather's novel.

8. See Rosowski, *The Voyage Perilous* 4.

9. For a consideration of the influence of James and Flaubert in *A Lost Lady,* see Jo Ann Middleton (89–90, 96). David Stouck has noted that *A Lost Lady* has strong affinities with Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (*Imagination* 72).

10. In "The Novel Démeublé" Cather writes:

> Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as poetry itself. (50)

11. Jo Ann Middleton has offered an extended argument on behalf of the author's modernist approach to narrative form (19–50).

12. Huyssen makes a fundamental distinction between modernism and the historical avant-garde. Modernism generally maintains a complex, oppositional

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stance toward an increasingly commercialized popular culture, while the historical avant-garde movements (German expressionism, Dada, early French surrealism, and the like) attempted to bridge the divide between high and low art, between the aesthetic and the everyday, in the service of a radical political stance (vii–viii).

13. Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism, as well as its relationship with use value and exchange value, appears in the first chapter of *Capital*. For my purposes, I will be regarding the notion of autonomous art as structurally analogous to the commodity. Terry Eagleton has expressed the relationship thus:

> The moment we are speaking of is the moment of modernity. . . . Art is now autonomous of the cognitive, ethical, and political; but the way it came to be so is paradoxical. It became autonomous of them, curiously enough, by being integrated into the capitalist mode of production. When art becomes a commodity, it is released from its traditional social functions within the church, court and state into the anonymous freedom of the market place. Now it exists, not for any specific audience, but just for anybody with the taste to appreciate it and the money to buy it. And in so far as it exists for nothing and nobody in particular, it can be said to exist for itself. It is "independent" because it has been swallowed up by commodity production. (*Ideology* 369).

14. Adorno addresses the contradictory "autonomy" of art throughout *Aesthetic Theory;* see in particular 225–29.

15. James Schroeter's "Criticism in the Barricades" offers a helpful survey of Cather's critical reception during the 1930s.

16. In a 1925 interview with Flora Merrill, Cather explained her intentions for Niel as follows:

> *A Lost Lady* was written in five months, but I worked with some fervor. I discarded ever so many drafts, and in the beginning wrote it in the first person, speaking as by the boy himself. The question was, by what medium could I present her the most vividly, and that, of course, meant the most truly. There was no fun in it unless I could get her just as I remembered her and produce the effect she had on me and the many others who knew her. . . . I had to have something for Marian Forrester's charm to work on. . . . You can't talk about beauty for pages and pages. You have to have something for it to hit, and the boy answered that purpose. (77–78)

17. See Stouck, "Willa Cather and the Impressionist Novel" 48–58.

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18. Nichols's essay offers an extended examination of the Oedipal dilemma in the novel. Demaree C. Peck has echoed this reading, but with an emphasis on the role of Isabelle McClung in Cather's biography (170–188). Also see Diane Cousineau's "Division and Difference" and Sharon O'Brien's "Mothers, Daughters, and the 'Art Necessity'" (288).

19. Nina Schwartz has proposed that Ivy Peters's role as "shyster" and venal land developer may be viewed as the logical counterpart to Captain Forrester's role as railroad baron: "I would argue . . . that Ivy Peters is the legitimate offspring of the childless Captain, whose enterprise he effectively repeats in the only way available to him in the all-but-settled West of the turn of the century" (47–48).

Also see Stout 195–97.

20. Kathleen L. Nichols argues that this reading offers a vicarious form of sexual gratification for Niel, who appears as "somewhat of a literary Peeping Tom" (190). That his reading would have such overtones appears appropriate here, both as an expression of Niel's highly sublimated sexuality and a reflection of his "consumerist" orientation toward literature. Nichols also proposes that Niel's reading—which largely consists of male initiation narratives (*Don Juan, Tom Jones, Wilhelm Meister*) and erotic elegies (Ovid's *Heroides*)—provides an ironic counterpoint to his inability to enter a world of adult sexuality (190–91).

21. Adorno writes:

> There is no art that does not contain in itself as an element, negated, what it repulses. If it is to be more than mere indifference, the Kantian "without interest" must be shadowed by the wildest interest, and there is much to be said for the idea that the dignity of artworks depends on the intensity of the interest from which they are wrested. (11)

22. Peck's response to this passage is especially insightful:

> As if human passion were a quantifiable asset like money in the bank, Niel seems to be asking Marian what kind of inner savings she has made. Above all, he wants to know if she has been able to store her essential personality in an inner vault, safe from the thefts of men like Ellinger. . . . If Marian's vitality is a kind of "capital," then, in Niel's view, it is a limited amount that ought not to draw interest from her emotional investments in others; either she can save herself up for his imaginative use or she can spend herself in human relationships, only to become impoverished of her best self. Niel's theory of the economy of

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> human relationships will permit no mergers among investors, no common stock, no common bonds. He and Frank cannot share Marian; she is a property whose value must accrue to one or the other. (180)

As Peck notes, the correlation between Marian's affairs and the bank foreclosure further underscores a symbolic "economy" of moral and sexual value in the novel (179). Such a pattern offers a crucial counterpoint to Marian's aesthetic value in Niel's eyes.

23. In considering Marian Forrester as a form of "cultural currency" between various male characters, I am primarily indebted to Gayle Rubin.

24. For divergent feminist assessments of Cather's use of male narrators or characters as masks, see Russ 81, 83; O'Brien, "The Thing Not Named" 597–98; Fetterley 43; Zimmerman 123; Carlin 21; Lambert 676–80; Sedgwick 68–69; and Butler 143–45.

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Reviews

Autonomy to Indeterminacy

From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century
by Jennifer Ashton
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 201 pages

Steve McCaffery

The much-vaunted millennium with its Y2K panic button seemed an appropriate time to finally bury the eroded and otiose discussion of a modern/postmodern rupture. So the prospect of yet another full-length debate on the matter seemed, for this reader, to augur if not a critically still-born project, then the prospect of a boring read. However, Jennifer Ashton's new study, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century,* proved to be a surprising reward, nothing less than a cornucopia of fresh critical thinking and revisionary relations. It is a demanding—and correspondingly rewarding—book, ambitious in its transdisciplinary articulations, negotiating aspects of cognitive science and logico-mathematical philosophy to accompany and complicate detailed close readings. Ashton is clearly a scholar of the first order, a focused and diligent reader, amply equipped to take on the obfuscations and obduracy of modernist and contemporary texts and much of their ambient (and frequently ignored) discourse networks.

From Modernism to Postmodernism is an excellent book, and even those chapters that fall short of excellence at least vivify by advancing a vibrant polemic. Ashton outlines her ambitious project (and it is ambitious) in the book's introduction, "Modernism's new literalism." She writes: "This project . . . is an attempt to alter the currently received history of twentieth-century American poetry by showing that Stein and (Riding) Jackson have been, and continue to be, misunderstood as postmodernists *avant la lettre*" (2). The book seeks to shatter all conciliation between two purportedly divided period practices and takes direct issue with Marjorie Perloff's arguments in her *Twenty-First-Century Modernism,* especially

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Perloff's concept of literalism. Among other things, Ashton disputes Stein's alleged precursory status as regards the contemporary penchant for the open text.

Ashton outlines a clear theoretical trajectory: from the work of Stein and (Riding) Jackson, who are committed (according to Ashton) to upholding the aesthetic autonomy of artworks and who presuppose as the fundamental tenet of their practice the centrality of authorial intention in the creation of artworks to a postmodernist consecration of indeterminacy, the irrelevance of intention, and the ineluctable impossibility of aesthetic autonomy (as in the work of Ashbery and Language poetry). For Ashton, the two poles of this trajectory articulate the great modern/postmodern divide. (Interestingly, Perloff's thesis is roughly congruent with Habermas's idea of a "century sandwich," with postmodernism the pastrami between two thick slices of whole-wheat modernism.) The book widens its parameters to further explore "the fact that the avant-garde credentials of Perloff's 21st-century modernists derive more from the New Critical 'mainstream' they claim to repudiate than from the marginalized experimentalism they claim to embrace" (11). (Lock Bruce Andrews in a room with the ghost of John Donne and let's see what happens.) There's a further aspiration: to expose the "more pervasive project of postmodernism in general: the effort to make meaning a matter of someone's intention, and to make interpretation a matter of reaction rather than understanding" (13).

There is much in this polemical work on which to comment. Given the limitations of a short review, let me engage a couple of matters: the period terms themselves and Ashton's handling of Language poetry. Like Brian McHale in his fine book *The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole*, Ashton treats the term *postmodern* as the prefix to a national literary style or cluster of formal tendencies, largely ignoring the wider ramifications of the term as a designator of complex and evolving cultural forces—what Lyotard dubbed a "condition." Moreover, it is presented as a historically unproblematic period term when in fact its history shows itself to be transhistoric. The word *postmodern* is a late-Victorian coinage first used in 1884 (a convenient date for situating the variant poetries of Swinburne, Browning, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé, and more convenient for arguing the rise of the postmodern within modernism's nascent early days); it is employed by Arnold Toynbee in 1940 and by Randall Jarrell in 1946, and by architect Mies van der Rohe around the same time. Charles Olson is

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the first poet to call himself postmodern, in the early 1950s. Paul Hoover's popular *Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Poetry* (1994) commences with Charles Olson's "In Cold Hell, in Thicket" and concludes with the Language poet Diane Ward's "Lovely Stuff." Situated between these two terminals are representatives of the New York School, the Beats, Black Mountain, Deep Image, the Black Arts Movement, and Language poetry. This is hardly a consortium of confreres. Indeed many of these "postmodernists" adopt a poetics hostile to each other (Language poetry's repudiation of speech-based poetics being one example), and the anthology's fecundity derives as much from the incompossibilities it presents as from any unitary quality or stance. If one wants to tease a definition out of this motley gathering, then one would define *postmodern* as unnameable incommensurate heterogeneity, or phrased as a question: "If Allen Ginsberg's postmodern, what's Barrett Watten and Susan Howe?" Ashton, however, equates the term with one stylistic feature: indeterminacy, and this is to fall hopelessly short of accuracy.

That said, I thoroughly concur with Ashton's main thesis that Riding and Stein, as much as Walter Benjamin and Mikhail Bakhtin, are modernist and not postmodern *avant la letter.* But this hardly negates the tangible evidence of their ongoing usefulness as a resource for, or inspiration to, numerous contemporary American poets. For the British poets Adrian Clarke and Robert Sheppard, the modernist legacy is neither burden nor valediction but a readily available reservoir of techniques. "Older 'modernisms,'" they aver, "have seemed less movements than a loose-leaf manual of literary guerilla tactics" (123). I believe this sentiment is also taken up by the majority of contemporary formally inventive poets. Influence often takes nonlinear trajectories, and if *postmodern* suggests a going beyond, why not a postmodern that, along Hegelian lines, incorporates aspects of the modern within its profile? The periodic categorizations within architecture offer a case in point. Eschewing the great divide, twentieth-century architecture incorporates modernist and postmodernist tendencies alongside each other as parallel and variant proclivities. Indeed, the history of the last 100 years of Western architecture is testimony to the fact that historical change can occur in the form of historical accretion without the dialectical necessity of negation. (A lasting legacy of poststructuralism is to have shown the productive porosity of frames, their hymeneal propensity to pliancy and rupture.)

One thing is certain: *From Modernism to Postmodernism* is neither a

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title nor a book to attract active poets. Ashton exacerbates the already sad divide between the way academics position and the way artists create. Few if any practitioners would call themselves postmodern. "Formally innovative" or "investigative" or "inventive" are the preferred descriptions precisely because these terms relate to praxis across periods and disciplines, not exegesis. For the majority of artists, the rhetoric of periodization produces institutional shibboleths that facilitate temporal frames, when cultural thresholds, communities, transhistoric influences, countermoves, and tactics are far more salient. (It's for this reason that Fluxus artist Dick Higgins's book *Modernism since Postmodernism: Essays on Intermedia* offers a valuable counterpart to Ashton's critical position.)

Equally problematic is the book's definition of Language poetry. An adequate history of this movement has yet to be written, so objections to Ashton's lapse in accuracy may be mitigated somewhat. That said, to rest a definition on the two features of indeterminacy and openness is to aestheticize the work at the expense of its political mandates. (Its campaign on behalf of the productive reader, incidentally, was already belated in the shadow of Umberto Eco's theory of the open work first put forward in 1962 and 1964. Eco provides a rare instance of the critic being ahead of the artist.) A contrived textual indeterminacy was but a single facet of Language poetry, a facet alongside a critique of voice and authenticity, an embrace of artifice, a laying bare of the method of production, a preference for heteroglossia over monoglossia while at the same time rejecting narrative modalities, and a general critique of instrumental language under capitalism, mass mediation, and the consciousness industry—all key elements in its early theorizing. Moreover, fragmentation, disjunction, grammatical transgression, and catechresis are not only modernist tactics reincorporated in a different historical moment to render meaning purely reaction, and effective instruments in promoting indeterminacy for readerly engagement, they are also central to Heidegger's broader call to linguistic emancipation first raised in his 1947 "Letter on Humanism":

> In this regard "subject" and "object" are inappropriate terms of metaphysics, which very early on in the form of Occidental "logic" and "grammar" seized control of the interpretation of language. We today [1947] can only begin to descry what is concealed in that occurrence. The liberation of language from grammar into a more essential framework is reserved for thought and *poetic creation.* (218; emphasis added)

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In the light of this statement (made three years before the publication of Olson's *Projective Verse*), Language poetry truly seems to complete, or at least continue, the Heideggerian project.

This is not to belittle Ashton's accomplishment, simply to specify some critical inadequacies that undermine the success of her thesis and to point to the failure of her critical trajectory to fully live up to the book's title. *From Modernism to Postmodernism* engages a selection of American poetry and theory in the twentieth century. The arc is apparent: from Stein and (Riding) Jackson by way of Pound and the objectivists to Ashbery, the Language poets, and Jorie Graham. This is selective indeed, and raises the question: how can a critical document on twentieth-century poetry and poetics ignore Olson, Denise Levertov, Robert Duncan, or such post-Language poets as Kenneth Goldsmith? The book's best and most cogent moments occur in the discrete chapters. Ashton is at her best when comparing and differentiating representative modernisms: (Riding) Jackson, Stein, Williams, Pound, and Zukofsky, constructing the image of a heterological, if not fractured, movement. Pound's early aspirations to universality are admirably demonstrated to be incompatible with Stein's insistence on autonomy, her belief that "art, can only possess its value of permanence to the extent that what it represents . . . is independent of any individual's experience of it" (Ashton 134). It's in this spirit that I heartily welcome Ashton's revisionist engagement with New Criticism and its rehabilitation. (Her concern, by the way, is not with testing the feasibility of such claims and the more fundamental issue of whether autonomy can ever be achieved.)

Some of the most fascinating parts of the book are those devoted to Stein. In the second chapter, "Making the rose red: Stein, proper names, and the critique of indeterminacy," Ashton discusses Stein's name determination in an attempt to counter the "postmodernization" of her work. Combining dense analyses of Stein passages, Ashton moves on to position Steinian nomenclature in the context of contemporaneous logico-philosophical debate (especially the theories on names put forward by Gotlobb Frege and the younger Bertrand Russell). Ashton complicates en route to elucidation some of Stein's more enigmatic phrases, showing, for example, that Stein's postulate that "names have a way of being attached to those that bear them" in effect reverses Frege's postulate that names have only a referential function. This is an original and valuable contribution to Stein criticism and raises the interesting possibilities of

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Stein's own encounter with logico-mathematical philosophy and its formative effects on her writing. Accordingly, it's regrettable that there is one significant lacuna: Ashton fails to notice the profoundly atavistic nature of Stein's name determination and its origin in Platonic language theory. She accurately points out that in *Four in America* names determine destinies but fails to connect Stein's theory to the notion of name determination outlined in Plato's dialog *Cratylus,* where, to counter Hermogenes's theory that names have an arbitrary relationship to the person or thing that they name, Cratylus advances precisely Stein's claim: that a name "denotes character and career," that a name is determinant of action and has a natural connection to what it names. The Cratyllian aspect in Stein and in modernism remains to be explored.

I left the book with one structural complaint: its disproportionate attentions. It's somewhat perplexing why Ashton, in a book purportedly devoted to twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry, would concentrate so much on Gertrude Stein (more than a third of the entire book is devoted to Stein), and even more baffling that she would concentrate so much on Stein's narrative work.

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The Field of Popular Fiction

Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field
by Ken Gelder
Abingdon: Routledge, 2004. 179 pages

Scott McCracken

The study of popular fiction provokes something of a dilemma for the literary critic. While she or he may consider certain popular texts of little or no value from an aesthetic point of view, how to avoid a similarly devastating judgment on the reader? For the undemocratic critic there is no dilemma. The masses are, quite simply, unqualified to judge. But for the democratic critic, their reading tastes should not, surely, disqualify the majority from the right to make a judgment. Undecided among themselves, as befits a democratic polity, those who eschew lofty condescension have adopted one of three critical approaches to the problem.

In the first, the masses are not ready (yet) to appreciate great literature and, pending their better education, have to make do with what is on offer. This view is sometimes attributed, by way of a useful but erroneous shorthand, to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's theory of the culture industry. Gelder describes Adorno and Horkheimer as "highbrow," an odd designation perhaps for two Marxists, but one that has become commonplace in studies of popular culture that use a simplified version of their work as an example of the high-modernist dismissal of popular taste. The second approach was pioneered by the cultural studies movement, which sought to alter the terms of the debate, questioning the divide between high and low and introducing a more encompassing concept of culture, as in Raymond Williams's concept of "culture as a way of life," which is not bound by a narrow aesthetic of literary value.

Finally, sociology has sought a more scientific account of taste. Here a key influence has been the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who introduced the idea of the cultural field, a terrain on which various forms compete within a complex and constantly changing hierarchy of value. The origin of Bourdieu's theory lies in his study of a whole culture, that of the Kabyle in Algeria, and is laid out in *Le Sens Practique*, published in France in 1980 and translated into English in 1990 as *The Logic of*

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Practice. Bourdieu tackles the concept of a specifically literary field in his 1992 work, translated in 1996 as *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of a Literary Field*. Gelder's book, if we judge it by its cover, pays homage to Bourdieu: its title suggests a Bourdieuian approach. It even suggests a refinement of that approach, *logics* rather than logic, *practices* rather than practice. However, as is often the way when an embossed and glittering title catches the eye on the bestseller stand, what you see is not what you get.

A key element of Bourdieu's concept of the cultural field is that it constitutes an interconnected structure. A new entrant (Bourdieu's example in *The Rules of Art* is Flaubert) has to judge his or her entrance in relation to the existing field, but, if successful, that entrance will reconstitute it. Thus it is impossible to talk about one part of the field except in relation to the whole. For Gelder, however, the field of popular fiction has high fences. It is quite distinct from the field of literary fiction, which he calls Literature with a capital L. That field contains another species of beast entirely. To this extent, Gelder reintroduces the high art/low art distinction abolished by cultural studies. However, where earlier versions of this divide distinguish to dismiss, the aim of Gelder's enclosure is to focus exclusively on his object of study.

Once penned in, popular fiction is untroubled by potential predators, the classics, which, in their absence, assume the lack of definition typical of the monsters of myth. Chapter 1 claims that Literature is what popular fiction is not: "popular fiction is the opposite of Literature." It cannot therefore be judged by the same criteria. Popular fiction can be defined by its relation to genre and the whole industrial apparatus of production, distribution, and consumption, which Gelder calls "processing." But given the importance of the other term in any binary, it seems odd that the question "what is Literature?" is left hanging. As a consequence, the reader has to work out this rather large concept for him or herself.

Perhaps the closest position to Gelder's implied other is Derek Attridge's notion of "singularity." For Attridge, in an argument also pitted against cultural studies, the work of literature is defined by its inventiveness, which is in excess of all earlier literary conventions and indeed exceeds any attempt to limit its meaning to its social and historical context. The literary work introduces alterity into the cultural field. Gelder's adoption of the principle of singularity suggests by implication that popular fiction cannot and never will be singular. However, this proves a difficult distinction to maintain.

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Gelder's is the first book on popular fiction to use fully the enormous resources of the internet, which has expanded what Genette calls "paratexts," the textual apparatus of the work of fiction—its title, blurb, acknowledgments, and so on—into an ever-expanding sphere of commentaries, information about the author, and parallel fictions. This opens up a vast and almost unnavigable sea of material, which requires selection and historicization. Each chapter is heavy with information, but Gelder provides no historical framework. This both limits usefulness of the information given and raises questions about the judgments made on individual texts. For example, a general statement such as "It isn't unusual for popular writers to find their work routinely produced in other entertainment fields, like cinema and theatre," takes Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as its example. The choice of an early nineteenth-century text opens up at least three questions that throw Gelder's definition of a field of popular fiction into doubt.

First, Shelley's text does not fall easily into a classification distinct from Literature. In fact, it is difficult to argue that it is not a singular text by Attridge's definition: its inventiveness exceeds earlier conventions, and it has had an afterlife that suggests it was not bound by the conditions of its original production and reception. Second, it is a remarkable novel that has played a part in the founding of the gothic genre, yet is also one of the first works of science fiction. Even considered alone, it throws into doubt the claim that the "entire field of popular fiction is written for, marketed and consumed generically," a claim that does not allow for the possibility of inventive hybrids. That such hybrids cannot be countenanced perhaps explains why Gelder does not tackle the difficult category of the best seller, one of the enduring forms of popular fiction, and one that is often multigenred, much as Mikhail Bakhtin claims the novel itself is multigenred. It also accounts for the awkwardness of his attempt to distinguish between literary and nonliterary crime fiction.

Third, there is the question of whether comparing a novel published in 1816 with contemporary popular fiction makes sense. Gelder writes that "even though some readers will argue the point, Dickens did not write popular fiction." Readers in the 1850s would certainly have argued the point, but was it the same point? Comparing the mass appeal of nineteenth-century novels with late twentieth-century mass fiction is not comparing like with like. Gelder is quite right to argue that popular fiction must always be understood in relation to industrial production and

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commercial concerns, but at least since the invention of the steam press, this has also been true of Literature. What is important is not whether, but how. Since the nineteenth century, the literary field has been shaped and formed by at least three distinct technological revolutions: the industrial revolution opened up the possibility of the production and distribution of mass fiction and created a mass audience; in the twentieth century new media—cinema, radio, and television—led to a new intertextual environment in which the printed word, not unchanged by its competitors, was just one medium among many; and finally, the unfinished computer revolution has once again transformed the conditions in which popular fiction is written. This latter phase is still unfolding, and its new forms are still evolving. Each of these different cultural epochs produced different literary fields in which the meaning of the "popular" varied.

Gelder has probably missed an opportunity to explore the impact of the most recent revolution, but the descriptive mode in which he works is not particularly amenable to the critical stance it demands. His account of the twin Hollywood careers of Jackie and Joan Collins elicits some of the pleasures of the expanding sphere of celebrity literature, fictional and nonfictional, but does little to position that literature in relation to the history of popular culture. The lack of a historical framework means that, for example, the transformations a popular narrative can undergo from its origins in myth to its mediation in a popular newspaper, as described in the work of as comprehensive and subtle a critic as Marina Warner, are not touched upon.

One reason for this, perhaps, is Gelder's distaste for what he terms "ideological" readings. Now, the line that those who disavow ideology are themselves unaware of their own ideological limitations is bit like the Freudian theory of denial. It puts the accused in a no-win situation. To refute the indictment is to find oneself guilty. So before I defend the concept of ideology critique, I should put my cards on the table. It will be clear by now that I think that Gelder's opposition between popular fiction and Literature doesn't hold when you examine popular texts. The borders between high, middle, and low remain porous, no matter how well policed by literary Minutemen such as Jonathan Franzen, whose battle with the "middlebrow" institution of Oprah Winfrey's book club is documented here. There is no opposite of popular fiction. In fact, Franzen's novel *The Corrections* is a good example of a text that is literary, yet contains elements of a popular genre, the family saga (which might be

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why Franzen is so sensitive on the subject). However, I also have a political disagreement with this book and that is a different matter.

Gelder's dismissal of cultural studies critics who identify the ideological elements of popular fiction posits a politics that refuses to represent itself as such. This matters because the popular has always been political and because popularity has a complex relationship to power. The committed critic of popular culture has a responsibility to engage with the political meanings of popular fiction in so far as they relate to questions of power. Gelder admits that the popular reader is a critical reader, a step toward the cultural studies approach that validates the rationality and expertise of the consumer. However, his unwillingness to explore the contradictory meanings such texts have for their readers means that his book evades a critical position on the industrial and commercial conditions in which popular fiction is produced and received. Such a position need not necessarily be anticapitalist, but it should offer a critical distance on the cultural process from which the literary field emerges. Without such a distance, we are left with information without discrimination, a reflection rather than an analysis of the internet age.

To be fair, what I am asking for here is something quite distinct from Gelder's definition of the field of popular culture and his implied appropriation of the principle of singularity. For, contra Attridge, a recognition that the literary field is part of a larger cultural process allows for inventiveness even at the heart of the most formulaic of narratives. There is a tradition in cultural studies that has never seen cultural artifacts as the instrumental effects of historical and social conditions. As in Raymond Williams's distinction between the residual, the dominant, and the emergent, the work always engages with the future as well as being conditioned by the past and present. As ephemeral, transient—in short, throwaway—texts, popular fictions are in some ways the best registers of cultural and social change. Sometimes, as Walter Benjamin has pointed out, in the detritus of modernity we find auguries of what is to come. As feminist critics have shown, while the broad conventions of the popular romance have remained unchanged for a hundred years, the details of the struggle between submission and resistance have evolved in important ways. It is true that these details often represent small victories in the face of large defeats. But it is in these victories and their promise that the pleasures and hopes of popular fiction reside.

The question of politics aside, Gelder's survey represents a valiant at-

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tempt to get to grips with an area that defies easy definition. The structure allows him to cover many of the key concepts and ideas of the critical field; and it is vital in a book of this kind to devote the proper space to actual popular texts. In this respect, the book does as well as any earlier attempt to go beyond a single popular genre and discuss popular fiction as a whole. That it provokes as many questions as it answers, that it is likely to invite vigorous responses from the critical paradigm—cultural studies—that authorized the study of popular culture in the first place, is all to the good. The ever-growing field of popular fiction is unlikely to be properly fenced any time soon.

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The Urge for Totality

The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace
by Matthew Wilson Smith
London: Routledge, 2007. 226 pages

Alan Ackerman

Although conceptions of the unity, integrity, or wholeness of the work of art stretch back to antiquity, the emergence of the aesthetic as a theoretical category in eighteenth-century German thought is closely bound up with the rise of middle-class models of human subjectivity that are intrinsically related to the material process by which cultural production is rationalized as existing entirely for itself—the process, in short, whereby artifacts become commodities. While the discourse of aesthetics focuses on this notion of autonomy or self-referentiality, the concept of aesthetic autonomy is radically double-edged. The aesthetic, as Terry Eagleton puts it, "signifies a creative turn to the sensuous body, as well as an inscribing of that body with a subtly oppressive law; it represents on the one hand a liberatory concern with concrete particularity, and on the other hand a specious form of universalism" (9). Nowhere are the central contradictions of aesthetics represented more eloquently and plainly than in the works of Friedrich Schiller, the "poet of freedom" whose theory of aesthetic education also requires a measure of coercive force. In his essay "Theater Considered as a Moral Institution" (whose working title was "Was eine gute Schaubühne bewirken kann"—"What a Good Theater Can Accomplish"), he undertakes to show that "the stage wields critical, determining influence over morality and enlightened thought."[1] He argues that the poet has two contradictory obligations: to let our imaginations play freely and to induce specific reactions or effects in the audience. The dialectical relationship between freedom and determinism, so central to Schiller's theory of aesthetic reception and his thinking about morality, politics, and art, is at the root of his huge and complex legacy. Much honored in the United States since the early nineteenth century, he was also cited approvingly by the Nazi propaganda minister Josef Goebbels.

It is this double-edged legacy of German romanticism in aesthetic production and reception, channeled through Wagner and Brecht and

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reaching to computer art and popular culture, that Matthew Wilson Smith analyzes in his illuminating new book *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace*. Smith writes:

> The history of the total work of art (or *Gesamtkunstwerk*) is inseparable from this dialectical relation. From its very outset, the total work of art has been marked by clashes between mechanical and organic form, technology and technophobia, mass reproduction and the aura of originality, individual genius and the *Volk*, commerce and communism. The first key to understanding the history of the form is to understand that these contradictory impulses are not markers of some vague or hopelessly ambiguous lineage but rather opposing elements of an internal dialectic. In other words, the history of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is, to a large degree, the history of un-reconciled dialectical struggles performed under the sign of aesthetic totality. (3)

Smith's remarkably wide-ranging study moves fluidly between Wagner's music dramas and contemporary mass media. Like the artists he studies, Smith seeks to transcend distinctions between "high art" and "mass culture." Central to the book's argument about Wagner is the insight that behind the composer's attacks on the "mechanized world" lay a profound reliance upon it. Smith traces his project's origin to seeing a production of *Parsifal* at Bayreuth shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall and wondering in that context what the continuing urgency of the *Festspielhaus* might be. This smart question leads him to the relationship between Wagner's aesthetics and his politics, and to the aim of restoring integrity to a fragmented society, without ignoring the importance of Wagner's anti-Semitic rhetoric. Smith brilliantly reads Wagner's theory of the total work of art in light of the technological developments and structural transformations of the mid-nineteenth century. Seen through the lens of Habermas, Wagner's struggles with the problem of being an "artist of the people" in a mass-mediated and pluralistic society reflect a dilemma of art and mass culture that ironically became one of the most fruitful sources of his art. Wagner's most ambitious attempt to transcend the problems of mass culture and mechanization came with the opening of his festival theater in 1876.

Organizing the argument are two models of the total work of art epitomized by Wagner's *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth and Joseph Paxton's

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1851 Crystal Palace in London. Both expressed an "urge for totality" that was inseparable from the emergence of mass culture in the middle of the nineteenth century. Smith's reading of these respective cultural events, architectures, and theatrical spectacles is detailed and nuanced. Through his *Festspielhaus* Wagner sought to counter the degrading effects of industrial capitalism through a restoration of the antique relationship between the German people and the German landscape, to separate the audience from the stage in order, dialectically, to overcome that separation. Wagner was an innovator both in performance technology and the concealment of performance technology. In brilliant close readings of *Siegfried* and *Parsifal*, as well as of Wagner's essays and manifestos, Smith reveals the political and aesthetic dimensions of Wagner's distinction between organism and mechanism. The liturgical aspect of *Parsifal*, for instance, differentiates it from Wagner's other music dramas and enables the fullest realization of his dream of the total work of art, the realization that the medium is the message and that both are sacred. The great strength of *The Total Work of Art* is the clarity and power with which it situates Wagner in a historical context up to the present moment, deftly handling the breadth of Wagner criticism and of Wagner's own work. Smith calls Wagner's form of *Gesamtkunstwerk* "iconic"—a totalizing performance machine that hides the mechanisms of its own production through appeals to nature, to roots, to myth, to blood, to folk. The Crystal Palace, on the other hand, anticipates a form of *Gesamtkunstwerk* that Smith calls "crystalline"—a totalizing performance that exposes and celebrates symbols of technology and mechanized production while simultaneously hiding real labor beneath the veneer of a supposedly organic unity. The two forms are equally ideological, two sides of the same coin of industrial capital and the dream of mass utopia.

Offering the first book-length study of the evolution of the total work of art will in itself prove a major contribution to theater, music, media, and literary studies, but this excellent book's most valuable contributions, I suspect, will be in the revaluation of individual artists such as Wagner, Brecht, and Warhol, as well as the introduction of new cyber artists such as Char Davies and Roy Ascott. These chapters should be assigned reading on their subjects, and one could easily build a course around them. For example, while Brecht is generally viewed as Wagner's foil, his epic theater the antithesis of the total work of art, Smith compellingly shows through careful close readings that Brecht advocates not the

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elimination of the idea of the total work of art but the discovery of an openly divided and critical mixture of the arts that might still be called a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Enabling a more nuanced understanding of Brecht's accomplishment as it was staged in dialogue with Wagner, Smith shows that Brecht aims to develop a model of artistic unity through his montage technique and offers beautiful new readings of *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* and *The Lindberg Flight*, the latter as a manifestation of Brecht's search for a "dialectical form of electronically mediated collectivity" (91) that reflects his deepest engagement with the genre of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, his attempt not to discard but reconceive it without the organicist aesthetics. Brecht reimagines Wagner's ideal of unity.

In a 1919 manifesto, Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus with an evocation of both Bayreuth and the Crystal Palace, a union of art and technology that would restore the splintered whole of society. The vision was at once deeply indebted to German neoromanticism and openly celebratory of the revolutionary potential of industrialization. The Bauhaus theater in particular was shaped by the lineage of the total work of art, particularly by the crystalline model, an artwork that sought to expose the mechanical rather than burying it beneath the veneer of organicism while at the same time seeking to restore a unified aesthetic state. Among the valuable contributions of *The Total Work of Art* is the new attention Smith brings to Gropius's association of architecture with the theater, filling a lacuna in theater studies. The other Bauhaus artists most involved in the theater, Oskar Schlemmer and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, both embraced the narrative of the fragmentation of modern society by means of commerce and industry. For them the path to utopia lay "not in working against technical advance, but in exploiting it for the benefit of all" (54). As total machine and total organism, Schlemmer's absolute stage is at once artifice and nature, a theater of puppets and automata. Moholy-Nagy goes further, seeking to transform the stage into a "nonrepresentational synchronic totality of irreducible media." This "TOTAL STAGE ACTION" is to be "a great dynamic-rhythmic process" (60). The Bauhaus theater replaced Wagner's vision of an organic work of art with a vision of an organic machine, and yet this crystalline vision failed to resolve the fundamental contradictions of the total work of art. Here Smith's dialectical approach adroitly makes sense of contradictions. Ultimately he argues that the differences between Wagner and the Bauhaus artists were of degree rather than kind, and the mutual embrace of the Bauhaus and commodity cul-

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ture was one of the reasons the school could be successfully transplanted to America.

The Total Work of Art forthrightly addresses troubling political questions. The transition from Wagner, Bauhaus, and Brecht to Riefenstahl is deftly handled, and the reading of filmic images—and Wagner's relation to film—illuminates new dynamics between art and observer, specifically in Riefenstahl's disorientation of the viewer's subject position. In the problems of the relationship of documentary to propaganda that Riefenstahl raises, we are returned to Schiller's basic ethical and ontological questions and launched forward to the artwork of the future. In 1938, Walt Disney welcomed Leni Riefenstahl to Hollywood. One of the few non-Jewish film producers and one with noted anti-Semitic attitudes, Disney, whom Riefenstahl called the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" (citing his film *Fantasia*), appears as the inheritor of Wagner's mantle. Disneyland, Smith argues, marks the rebirth of the total work of art in the wake of its catastrophic realization in the Third Reich. Here, however, this highly sophisticated book glosses over some crucial differences. The notion that Disney ought to be read in this context remains valid, but the German genealogy by itself seems insufficient. The somewhat facetious comment that we are moving from the "German sublime" to the "American ridiculous" (115) does not adequately take American culture on its own terms (as if America had not produced theorists and practitioners of mass culture or national self-fashioning, let alone utopian communities and lonely crowds). Cold War cultural politics contributed substantially to changing Disney's products, which of course originated not after World War II but in the late 1920s, and as American culture evolved so did Disney. Disney's specialized (though not exclusive) orientation toward children and the molding of young minds not only in the service of nationalism but also toward membership in a liberal, individualistic, if increasingly conformist and self-observing, society, of which Walt Disney himself (or his marketed image) was the epitome, harks back to Schiller as well as to Rousseau, but Disney's version of the total work of art vis-à-vis the rationalization and integration of social, cultural, and economic life in postwar America, though often compared to the regulation of cultural life in Nazi Germany, also sought to delineate the qualities in American culture that made it resistant to totalitarianism. Nonetheless, Smith compellingly shows how Disneyland unified the arts in a "total world" that has key points of contact with the models of the *Festspielhaus* and the Crystal Palace (which

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Disneyland makes into a buffet restaurant); as such, the theme park represents a remarkable variation on the total work of art as a participatory and largely mechanized utopia. Like the crystalline work of art, Disneyland stages a technotopia, and like Bayreuth it contributes to the formation of a notion of nationhood.

In general, the overarching evolutionary model is highly effective and valuable, organizing artistic diversity in formal, thematic, and cultural terms, but the historical narrative, specifically the abrupt "passage to America" in the 1950s, is tenuous. Smith argues that the use made of the total work of art in the Third Reich by Leni Riefenstahl and others "made it unacceptable to most of the world but that the genre finds new life in America after the war in Disneyland." Curiously, then, this richly dialectical book neglects the longstanding dialectical relationship between its two central terms: Germany and America. While there is a brief reference to the fact that Germany and the United States are two nations whose battles for national unity were particularly violent in the mid-nineteenth century, the idea that a torch is passed or a bridge crossed after World War II ignores how vital the idea of America—and the ideals of revolution, independence, nature, novelty, materialism, and, later, commerce—were to German aesthetic theory and philosophy, and vice versa, how the German Enlightenment and its cultural authority shaped key American institutions such as universities and theaters. Some of Schiller's poems, essays, and dramas—especially *Wilhelm Tell*—were written with explicit reference to America and the American Revolution, and John Quincy Adams, who served as ambassador to the Prussian court from 1797 to 1801, before he became president in 1824, was one of Schiller's most famous translators. Schiller's plays were performed in the United States throughout the nineteenth century; his centenary in 1859 was celebrated with more fanfare in America than in Germany. Goethe was an extremely important figure for Emerson—especially as someone who combined a kind of classical and natural-scientific objectivity with artistic expressiveness. Although Emerson does not speak of Goethe as producing a total work of art, he does speak of him as being a kind of total personality. In this he anticipates Nietzsche, whom Emerson influenced in turn. Although Smith refers in passing to "the barbaric yawps of establishment supermen," this apparent paradox (and Whitman—author of the "barbaric yawp"—was both unembarrassed by capitalism and, in envisioning himself as a "kosmos," totalizing) is deeply historical and dynamic. In short, the relationship not only between German and American romanticism but also

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between American and German culture in the early twentieth century (such as the transatlantic impact of Taylorism or the Weimar Republic's *"Americanismus"*), though beyond the scope of this study, belies the spark from Nuremberg that catches fire in Cold War America.

However, the balance, breadth, and relevance of the book are especially evident in the last chapters, in which Smith presents Andy Warhol, admirer of Leni Riefenstahl, of the German tradition, and of Mickey Mouse, an ironic challenger of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, who undermined assumptions about the auratic qualities of mass reproduction. Warhol saw himself in contrast to Brecht and advocated an unabashedly American vision of totality. Working 50 years after the *Totaltheater* of Schlemmer and Moholy-Nagy, Warhol recognized that any total artwork in a consumer society must reflect the totalizing system from which it emerges. Significantly, Warhol became fascinated with computers in the last years of his life, and Smith's culminating insight extends this narrative into cyberspace "in all its utopian sublimity and corporatized banality" (157). Smith takes Wagner where he always hoped to go, to the artwork of the future, the aspiration to shape new worlds—now virtual worlds—powerfully demonstrating the degree to which the total work of art continues to shape our culture, for better and for worse. We must pay attention to its frequently disturbing history, he shows, to understand our troubled present. The book is full of strong and unexpected conclusions, such as the suggestion that with *The Lindberg Flight,* Brecht came closer to Reifenstahl than he would have wished by implying that mass media may be a way of turning the public into a choral mass. Finally, virtual-reality installations, such as Char Davies's use of 3-D digital technology, take the "immersant" beyond Bayreuth, beyond Bauhaus, and yet back to the future, to "postorganic performance," an intermingling of interior and exterior space, an overcoming of Cartesian dualities, a multimedia return to a "natural" state. Cyberspace continues to blur distinctions between artwork and commodity spectacle.

Note

1. Schiller's "Die Schaubühne als eine moralische Anstalt betrachtet" started as a lecture, "Vom Wirken der Schaubühne auf das Volk" ("On the Effects of Theater on the People"), and went through several revisions before being published in its final form in 1802.

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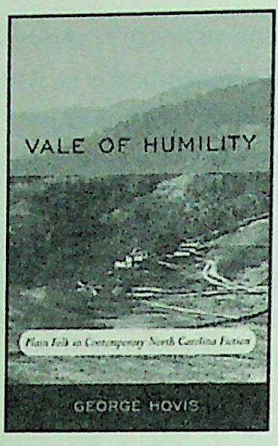

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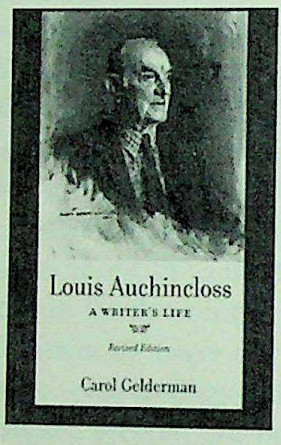

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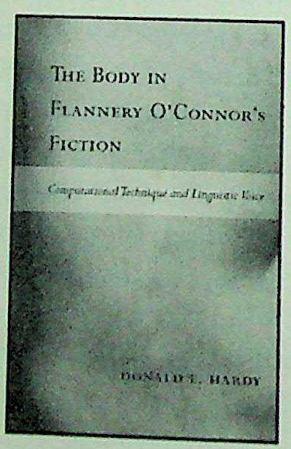

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Introduction: After Postmodernism

Andrew Hoberek

The essays in this issue of *Twentieth-Century Literature* propose new models for understanding contemporary fiction in the wake of postmodernism's waning influence. By now, as Jeremy Green notes, declarations of postmodernism's demise have become a critical commonplace (19–24). The intellectual historian Minsoo Kang provides a usefully succinct example, dating "the death knell of postmodernism in the US" on "June 18, 1993," the date that the John McTiernan–directed Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle *The Last Action Hero* brought "the standard [postmodern] devices of self-reference, ironic satire, and playing with multiple levels of reality" to the multiplex. "[I]n the US," Kang wryly notes, "there's no surer sign of an intellectual idea's final demise than its total appropriation by mass culture." In this formulation, postmodernism was done in by its own success. Postmodern writers had enjoyed a notorious and wild ride of radical challenge to institutionalized art and its generic categories in the 1970s and 1980s, but their ironic, skeptical, and knowing (yet celebratory) juxtapositions of high and low, and their rejection of objective (or political) reality as a significant object or limit for representation, no longer worked by the 1990s. Mass culture itself had appropriated the aesthetics of postmodernism, which—now playing monotonously on everyone's television and computer screens—turned out to be as reproducible as its creators had contemptuously said all previous art was.

At least that's one way to tell the story. But while there are good reasons, as the contributors to this issue show, for arguing that contemporary fiction is no longer adequately described as postmodern, this particular narrative of postmodernism's decline has three interrelated problems. First and perhaps most obviously, it perpetuates a hierarchical view of culture that confuses aesthetic questions about literary form with sociological

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ones about the constituencies for such form. This tendency to locate postmodernism's decline not in the waning of its forms but in their successful cultural diffusion points to a second problem with this narrative: its reproduction of the characteristically modernist investment—by and large carried over into high postmodernism—in difficult formal innovation as the defining characteristic of serious literature (Steiner 427–28). This is not to condemn formally challenging fiction in the name of some transparent realism, as Tom Wolfe, Dale Peck, and Jonathan Franzen have done,[1] but rather to criticize the elision of a certain modernist brand of self-conscious technical innovation with literary form in general. Wolfe, Peck, and Franzen ironically reproduce this elision in their own understanding of realism as opposed to, rather than a product of, authors' formal choices. Moreover, as I will suggest below, their polemics—while interesting as a symptom of postmodernism's waning influence—also participate in the inherently progressive and conflictual understanding of literary history that is the third problem with our story of postmodernism's decline. Although these authors champion a premodernist realism, that is, they evince a modernist understanding of literary change as grounded in periods of sweeping innovation that set aside their now-outmoded predecessors. While this model of literary history has been carried over into and codified in postmodernism, it in fact obscures the messy circumstances of postmodernism's own emergence and the parallels between this process and the contemporary state of fiction.

Kang, for instance, sees the current post-postmodern period of becalmed anticipation or "lull" as radically different from earlier periods of Western intellectual history characterized by intense conflict between dominant and emergent paradigms. But this assessment, while having some purchase in the field of cultural theory that spurs Kang's remarks, mischaracterizes the history of post–World War II American fiction. The current state of such fiction—in which postmodernism in the strong sense constitutes just one, no longer particularly privileged stylistic option among many—in fact resembles nothing so much as the state that followed the triumphant years of modernism. While American fiction after 1945 had clearly departed from the modernist path (unlike painting, where abstract expressionism constituted an Americanized extension of the modernist revolution), neither did it offer a clear alternative to modernism. As the essays that Marcus Klein collects in his 1969 volume *The American Novel Since World War II* suggest, critics in this period were

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acutely concerned with the waning of modernism, which like postmodernism today had become institutionalized and routinized (albeit not in mass culture but in the still partly autonomous realm of the university). But these critics had not yet distinguished postmodernism from competing styles or identified it as the dominant mode of serious fiction. It is true, for instance, that Irving Howe uses the scare-quoted term "postmodern" in the 1959 essay included in Klein's collection (137). But for Howe the postmodern remains a temporal rather than a formal category: he defines it with reference to an external condition (the rise of "mass society" [130] and the disappearance of the "fixed social categories" [137] upon which modernism battened), and he includes in his account authors (Bernard Malamud, J. D. Salinger, Saul Bellow) whose work we would now no longer consider postmodern. It is only toward the end of Klein's anthology, and the period that it covers, that something like what we consider to be postmodernism comes into view, albeit under other names such as black humor (Feldman). And even the final essay in the volume, John Barth's 1967 "The Literature of Exhaustion," has—despite its status as a postmodern manifesto—more to say about Jorge Luis Borges than any of Barth's contemporaries. Perhaps most tellingly, Thomas Pynchon gets only three entries in Klein's index, compared to Bellow's 28. Similarly, Tony Tanner's classic 1971 study of contemporary American fiction *City of Words* gives authors like Pynchon and William Burroughs more or less equal space alongside such fifties stalwarts as Bellow, Malamud, and Ralph Ellison (although Tanner includes a speculative conclusion citing William Gaddis, Donald Barthelme, and Richard Brautigan as examples of "how American fiction has moved, and is moving" [393]).

Like the narrative cinema that established itself over its rivals in the early twentieth century, though, postmodernism subsequently achieved a level of cultural hegemony that conferred upon it a retrospective inevitability. Beginning with Leslie Fiedler's and Ihab Hassan's early efforts to devise, in Fiedler's 1970 words, "a Post-Modernist criticism appropriate to Post-Modernist fiction and verse" (271), postmodernism was rapidly institutionalized in journals like *Boundary 2* and in important studies by Brian McHale, Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson, and others.[2] This is not to suggest that postmodernism was merely a critical fiction. Authors like Barth, Burroughs, and Gaddis were clearly producing recognizably postmodern texts in the 1950s, and postmodernism's prominence in the 1970s and 1980s was visible not only in syllabuses and academic jour-

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nals but also, for instance, in the postmodern turn taken by a decidedly nonacademic author like Philip Roth. Even at its high point, however, postmodernism—and in particular the form of postmodernism defined around self-conscious literary experimentalism—was not the only or even always the dominant player on the literary field. In 1974, a year after the publication of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow,* the original incarnation of the group that now calls itself Fiction Collective Two was founded to provide a venue for authors whose stylistic complexity even then made it hard for them to find commercial publishers.[3] And Wendy Steiner has argued that this period in American literary history is in fact best understood not as purely postmodern but as characterized by the coexistence and frequent commingling of high postmodernist experimentalism, traditional realism, and an autobiographical strain related to both women's writing and the memoir (528–29, passim).[4]

By this point, I might seem to have undercut this issue's premise by invalidating any basis for distinguishing between contemporary fiction and that of the so-called postmodern period. For one thing, postmodern techniques—even if they no longer play quite the dominant role they once did—have hardly disappeared from contemporary fiction. Green makes a strong case for their ongoing relevance, which is also visible in the continued prominence of authors like Pynchon and DeLillo and the work of younger figures like David Foster Wallace, George Saunders, and the writers associated with *McSweeney's.* Indeed, despite Franzen's antipostmodern polemics, his own writing continues to partake of a DeLilloesque "language of smart commentary" (Wood 208) that, we might speculate in the wake of his well-publicized contretemps with Oprah Winfrey, functions to offset the disturbingly feminizing implications of his turn to domestic fiction.[5] Moreover, the heterogeneity of contemporary fiction has its own analogues in the postmodern era: for the middle-class realism of Susan Choi and Jhumpa Lahiri, the books of John Updike; for the comic-book magical realism of Jonathan Lethem and Michael Chabon, the more traditional version practiced by Toni Morrison; for the picaresques of Han Ong, Jonathan Safran Froer, and Benjamin Kunkel, those of Saul Bellow. Given this, one might feel compelled to say that either fiction was never postmodern—the nominalist position—or it remains postmodern, in Fredric Jameson's sense that "the play of random stylistic allusion" (*Postmodernism* 18) signals the triumph of pastiche and the "disappearance of the historical referent" (25) central to postmodern

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culture.[6] Crucially, Jameson rejects what he calls "merely stylistic" (*Postmodernism* 45) descriptions of postmodernism in favor of an account that escapes postmodernism's own predilection

> For breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the telltale instant after which it is no longer the same; for the "When-it-all-changed," as [William] Gibson puts it, or better still, for shifts and irrevocable changes in the *representation* of things and of the way they change. (*Postmodernism* ix; Jameson's italics)[7]

In this regard, both the antipostmodern polemics of Wolfe et al. and the declarations of postmodernism's end like Kang's are, ironically, fundamentally postmodern gestures.[8] Meanwhile, the transformation of capitalism that Jameson describes has, if anything, accelerated since the 1980s, and many of the qualities that he attributes to postmodern culture—the increasing integration of "aesthetic production . . . into commodity production generally" (*Postmodernism* 4), the "random cannibalization of all the styles of the past" (18), the erosion of positions from which to resist or even interpret the dominant culture—seem no less relevant than when he first formulated them.

Yet the "merely stylistic" remains crucially important to those of us who teach and write about contemporary fiction and who face a situation in which (as Rachel Adams suggests in her essay in this issue) the postmodern style epitomized by Pynchon no longer provides a self-evident organizing principle for recent writing. Moreover, if we believe that stylistic shifts in works of literature presage, rather than merely symptomatize, larger cultural changes, then such shifts may have relevance beyond the aesthetic realm. The pleasure and the danger alike of thinking about contemporary literature lie in the tenuous nature of any hypotheses we might put forward—a fact that we should keep in mind but that should not stop us from proceeding.

Any effort to distinguish post-postmodern trends must, however, adduce specific aspects of fictional form that both occur across a range of contemporary writing and depart in some way from postmodern norms. One such formal feature occurs in the context of what might at first seem like evidence for postmodernism's ongoing influence: the blurring of high and mass culture central, for instance, to Chabon and Lethem's fascination with comic books or, from the other direction, the rise of the graphic novel to the status of a serious literary mode. But while

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postmodernism embraced popular forms in ways that modernism never did, there is a difference between the transitional but still self-consciously "literary" appropriation of popular genres in the work of authors like Barth and Pynchon (and still relevant for younger writers like Colson Whitehead and Michael Cunningham) and a newer tendency to confer literary status on popular genres themselves. Lethem, for instance, has with his 2003 *The Fortress of Solitide* (the same novel that not uncoincidentally exemplifies what I have called his comic-book magical realism) definitively crossed the divide from genre writer to serious artist, bringing earlier works like *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999) along with him. And certain science fiction authors—Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, William Gibson, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Neal Stephenson among them—increasingly garner critical attention of the sort that Richard Ohmann once described as conferring "pre-canonical" (398n2) status. Jameson himself has hinted that Robinson's Mars trilogy (1992–1996) limns an emergent post-postmodern literary form ("If I find").[9] The graphic novel likewise represents a case of a formerly disreputable medium that suddenly finds itself elevated to the status of literature (an uneven transition registered, among other places, in contemporary graphic fiction's tendency to insist on its own shameful relationship to established cultural forms [Worden 894–901, passim]).

From the opposite side of the cultural divide, authors with recognized high-cultural cachet now increasingly make forays into popular genres: the paperback romance in Bharati Mukherjee's *Holder of the World* (1993); the historical thriller à la Caleb Carr in E. L Doctorow's *The Waterworks* (1996); the contemporary crime thriller in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005); and the political potboiler in John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006). Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004)—which turns, in the wake of Roth's elevation to the status of the only working fiction writer to merit a Library of America edition, to the science fictional subgenre of the alternate history—provides a concrete example of how such recent deployments of genre fiction depart from high postmodernism's use of mass cultural materials. Rather than incorporating genre elements into a nonrealistic, fragmented, and metadiscursive narrative, as Pynchon does with the political conspiracy in *The Crying of Lot 49* or Barth with the sentient supercomputer in *Giles Goat-Boy* (both 1966), Roth adopts the science fiction plot wholesale as a framing device for a fundamentally realistic story of his family as they might have been under different his-

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torical circumstances. The "plot" of his title, that is, links the conspiracy in the novel to the pressure that the genre mode exerts on it at the level of form. Here it's worth noting that in "The Story Behind 'The Plot Against America'" Roth claims that "I had no literary models for reimagining the historical past" (10). Whether he speaks out of ignorance or disingenuousness (does, for instance, "literary" mean something more exclusive than just "in books"?), he retains enough of a residual commitment to the distinction between serious and genre fiction to either not know about or actively disavow the connection between his book and the huge corpus of science fiction novels—Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee* (1952), Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), and Keith Roberts's *Pavane* (1968), among others—that anticipate *Plot*. The point here is that Pynchon or Barth wouldn't have to disavow their borrowings from science fiction, since these borrowings are so clearly subsumed into a properly "literary" framework.

We can see in this example a continuity with the postmodern project as it works its way back and forth between the production and criticism of fiction: postmodern fiction's openness to mass culture begets the culturalist turn in criticism which begets not only the opening of the canon but also the expansion of what counts as literature in the present. Among younger authors this shift can be quite self-conscious. Thus Michael Chabon argues—at the same time that his fiction progresses from the early novels of alienated middle-class life through the transitional *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2001) to *The Final Solution* (2005), a novella featuring an unnamed but recognizable Sherlock Holmes, and his own alternate history *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007)—that serious authors should return to genre fiction as an antidote to the dominance of "the contemporary, quotidian, plotless, moment-of-truth revelatory story" (6), a form he understands not as essentially literary but as itself a genre contingently elevated to high cultural status. Chabon's trajectory suggests the way in which a movement within postmodernism has produced a potentially different formal possibility, even as it militates against thinking of this stylistic shift in epochal terms, as a dramatic break from everything that has come before. If focusing on the "merely stylistic" has any value it is precisely here, in reminding us that cultural sea changes only retroactively take the form of dramatic paradigm shifts, and appear first in processes of gradual, uneven, cellular transformation. This requires those of us interested in what follows postmodernism to look backward

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as well as forward, to consider what might have been taking place under our noses for some time. If the embrace of generic forms is in fact symptomatic, for instance, then what do we make of an author like Joyce Carol Oates, who has been pursuing it on and off throughout her career (and directly under her pseudonyms Rosamond Smith and Lauren Kelly)? Does this mean that Oates, so far from pursuing a residual form of realism alongside the postmodernism whose career roughly parallels her own, was in fact pioneering an emergent form to which authors like Roth and Chabon have come only lately? Green points out that postmodernism retroactively transformed our understanding of modernism (22); the same will inevitably be true of whatever succeeds postmodernism.

I have focused on the changing status of genre fiction not because it is the only or even necessarily the most important shift in recent fiction (it tells us little, for instance, about Lahiri's traditional, highly crafted prose), but because in its very concreteness it exemplifies the uneven transformations taking place in the fictional field. One might point to other such shifts, and indeed the contributors to this volume do. If, as I have already suggested, American fiction has entered a phase of as-yet-uncategorized diversity similar to the one that prevailed following World War II, then the proper response to this shift consists neither of assertions of postmodernism's continued relevance nor of sweeping declarations of a potential successor but rather of concrete analyses of literary form and the historical conditions that shape it. Mark McGurl's recent essay "The Program Era" provides a compelling example of such an approach applied to the grand arc of post–World War II fiction. McGurl argues that the rise of creative writing programs played an as-yet curiously underanalyzed role in shaping this fiction. As his essay makes clear, such an approach need not disavow questions of periodization: indeed, he provides a refreshingly novel account of the "metafictional reflexivity" (111) commonly associated with postmodernism by relating it to postwar fiction's "production in and around a programmatically analytical and pedagogical environment." Likewise, he expands our understanding of what constitutes the main line of postwar fiction, provocatively linking the "high cultural pluralism" (117) of the multicultural tradition and the "technomodernism" of "writers like Powers, DeLillo, and Pynchon" (121) as twin products of the institutional pressures shaping the postwar academy (117–21). Of course, like any process of selection, McGurl's model leaves some things out. His account of postwar fiction, for instance, does not promise to say

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much about the Beats, whose stylistic contribution to postwar letters Ann Douglas has stressed. So too, McGurl's account of "technicity" as a displaced form of ethnicity created in the juxtapostion of writing and science faculties (121–24) does much to explain the elevation of an author like Neal Stephenson, but it doesn't necessarily exhaust our understanding of genres now emerging into respectability from amateur or otherwise nonacademic subcultures—a phenomenon we might instead wish to trace back to the eminently nonacademic understanding of mental labor in the work of Philip K. Dick. And what of chick lit, a genre whose respectability remains questionable for reasons having to do with both gender and its proximity to consumer culture, but which itself identifies figures like Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë as progenitors (Harzewski 41, Wells 48–49, Ferris) and in a work like Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1996, 2001) offers up something like the new social novel that Franzen says he wants but can only imagine as the impossible restoration of an outmoded form?[10] Such qualifications can only arise, however, in response to McGurl's argument, and in this respect his account of postwar fiction is far more productive than those that deploy *postmodernism* as a portmanteau term or a category into which all contemporary fiction must be made to fit by main force.

The contributors to this issue apply a similarly grounded approach to works of the last several decades. They discuss which features of social life they see as formative for contemporary American fiction and how they understand fiction as registering and displaying those determinate features. In short, they describe the books they teach and read and what vision of American social conditions they deduce from them. Their essays share many things in common, though in the context that I have sketched throughout this introduction two ideas in particular stand out. First, if contemporary fiction is indeed post-postmodern, this does not exemplify some singular, dramatic, readily visible cultural transformation—the search for which in fact constitutes a postmodern preoccupation—but grows out of a range of uneven, tentative, local shifts that in some cases reach back into the postmodern period and can now be understood in hindsight as intimations of a new order. And as a corollary, these shifts can be apprehended neither in wholly aesthetic nor wholly historical terms but only in the intersections of specific stylistic and historical phenomena. With these thoughts in mind, the current volume seeks not to offer some new and sweeping theory of the post-postmodern but rather to begin to as-

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semble the kinds of concrete evidence for its existence that may someday make such a theory possible. Periodization is a valuable goal, but pursued properly, it is a long-term process that builds on rather than preempts such specifics. If we can initiate a conversation about contemporary fiction and what comes after postmodernism, we will have accomplished our goal.

Notes

1. In his 1989 *Harper's* essay "Stalking the Billion Footed Beast," Wolfe scolds his contemporaries for isolating themselves in sterile language games and giving up what he sees as the larger purpose of fiction: coordinating the flux and flow of contemporary urban experience in a new social realism. Meanwhile, in his frequently cited review of Rick Moody's 2002 memoir *The Black Veil*, Peck takes to task what he describes as the

> bankrupt tradition . . . that began with the diarrheic flow of words that is *Ulysses,* continued on through the incomprehensible ramblings of late Faulkner and the sterile inventions of late Nabokov (two writers who more or less sold out their own early brilliance), and then burst into full, foul life in the ridiculous dithering of John Barth and John Hawkes and William Gaddis, the reductive cardboard constructions of Donald Barthelme, the word-by-word wasting of a talent as formidable as Thomas Pynchon's, and finally broke apart like a cracked sidewalk beneath the weight of the stupid—just plain stupid—tomes of Don DeLillo. (185)

And finally Franzen, who expressed nostalgia for "the social novel" in a controversial 1996 *Harper's* essay ("Perchance to Dream" 37), has more recently used an essay on Gaddis as a platform for arguing against what he sees as the cult of difficulty for its own sake represented by "Pynchon, DeLillo, Heller, Coover, Gaddis, Gass, Burroughs, Barth, Barthelme, Hannah, Hawkes, McElroy, and Elkin" ("Mr. Difficult" 246).

2. For an extended account of postmodernism's rise to critical prominence see Green 29–34.

3. See Jerome Klinkowitz and the other essays that appear along with his in the special issue of *Symploke* titled *Fiction's Present.*

4. Green criticizes Steiner for what he sees as an antiexperimentalist bias similar to the one that I argue characterizes the polemics of Wolfe, Peck, and Franzen (25–28), although Green's account of Steiner's essay misrepresents her claims on several fronts. He argues, for instance, that she sets up a simplified

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"dichotomy between metafictionists and realists" (28), an assertion that ignores her actual tripartite division of contemporary fictional strands. He contends, furthermore, that "This opposition disregards the antirealism or postmodernism of minority authors" (28), a claim belied by her argument that Morrison's *Beloved* "mixes novelistic norms as violently as Don DeLillo in *White Noise*, mingling the ghost tale with the historical novel, dream narrative, and metastory" (Steiner 516). Steiner's reading of *Beloved* in fact instances her compelling description of the second-generation postmodernists of the 1980s (Morrison, DeLillo, and in one of his many reinventions, Philip Roth) as characterized by their expert blending of the experimental, realist, and autobiographical strands.

5. For a thorough discussion of Franzen's writing in the context of the Winfrey debacle see Green 79–116.

6. Arthur Danto provides a different account of postmodernism as characterized by stylistic heterogeneity. Briefly, he argues that the history of Western painting up until about the mid-1960s goes through two phases, a realist or Vasarian one (after the Renaissance painter and biographer Giorgio Vasari) in which art is concerned with increasingly more exact approximations of visual experience, and a modernist or Greenbergian one (after Clement Greenberg) in which it self-consciously investigates its own conditions of production. With the Warholian revolution, however, art enters a phase "after the end of art" (12), which is to say after the end of singular, progressive narratives about art. In this "post-historical" period, which "is defined by the lack of a stylistic unity, or at least the kind of stylistic unity which can be elevated into a criterion and used as a basis for developing a recognitional capacity," artists continue to work, but they are "liberated to do whatever they want to do" (125). In Danto's chronology, postmodernism is not only "a certain style we can learn to recognize" (11) but also an overly broad periodizing term pressed into existence when it finally becomes clear—something that does not happen "until well into the seventies and eighties"—that the modernist project no longer adequately characterizes the range of contemporary art. Postmodernism is, in this second sense, something like the afterlife of an afterlife, which temporarily forestalls the realization that art production now proceeds in the absence of a single determinate narrative of what it should do. Contra Jameson's stress on the ideological ramifications of heterogeneity in disabling analysis and judgment, Danto sees in this situation a kind of utopian foreshadowing of social diversity (125–28, passim)—a vision not entirely incompatible with Jameson's, if we recall Jameson's own insistence in his earlier essay "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" on the dialectical coexistence of utopian thought and ideology. While not unproblematically transferable to the case of fiction, Danto's account interestingly parallels Steiner's discussion of experimental postmodernism as an extension of modernism that became "a synecdoche for the whole period" (Steiner 428).

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7. See also Green 19–24.

8. Kang's precise declaration of the time of postmodernism's expiration echoes, for instance, David Harvey's well-known statement placing "the symbolic end of modernism and the passage to the postmodern [at] 3:32 p.m. on 15 July, 1972, when the Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St. Louis . . . was dynamited as an uninhabitable environment for the low-income people it housed" (39). While Harvey locates the end of modernism in the destruction of a symbol of modern standardized architecture, and Kang the end of *post*modernism in the mass diffusion of its worldview, this difference in the content of their statements obscures a more fundamental formal similarity: the urge to mark a shift in the way things are, or in the representation of the way things are, that postmodernism inherits from modernism (and in particular from modernism's characteristic nonfiction genre, the manifesto). It is, in this regard, fitting that many people attribute the use of Pruitt-Igoe as a periodizing marker to Harvey, even as he himself makes clear that he is citing the architectural historian Charles Jencks's earlier assertion (Jencks 9). And in fact both statements belong to a chain of periodizing claims reaching back at least to Virginia Woolf's 1924 pronouncement that "on or about December 1910 human character changed" (4)—a statement that already, in the mid-1920s, demonstrates the "postmodern" fascination with the liminal event. The fact that postmodernism tends to reduce such declarations to the level of the gestural, to the content of a repetition compulsion, accounts for the anxiety of its own periodizing declarations, encoded among other places in the numerous ruminations on the derivative (post-something else) nature of its name.

Bill Brown's recent meditation on Jameson's theory of postmodernity, which opens:

> When will we know that it was not the implosion of Minoru Yamasaki's Pruitt-Igoe complex in Saint Louis (15 July 1972) but, rather, the collapse of Yamasaki's World Trade Center in New York (11 Sept. 2001) that marked the advent of postmodernity, a postmodernity we've just begun to live? (734)

gestures toward this dynamic in what is arguably an effort to overload it and make it collapse of its own weight. Acknowledging the partial plausibility of claims—most notably Slavoj Žižek's—that the destruction of the twin towers marked the breakdown of the postmodern culture of the simulacrum, Brown nonetheless avers that "9/11 marks both a discontinuity and a significant continuity in the national and international landscape" (748n3) and suggests that the postmodern might best be thought of in terms that foreground its continual "reenactment" of such periodizing breaks and hence render ambiguous "the

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relation between modernity and its others, what we call the pre- and postmodern" (735).

9. See also Jameson's discussion of Gibson ("Fear and Loathing"); Walter Benn Michaels's readings of Butler, Delany, Robinson, and Stephenson; and Mark McGurl's comments on Stephenson.

10. Bushnell's book, so far from prefiguring the formulas of the genre it helps inaugurate, is notoriously fragmented. Having famously begun as a series of sketches for the *New York Observer,* in which a first-person narrator details the experiences of a variety of New Yorkers (including an English journalist who serves partly as the narrator's doppelganger and partly as the classic narrative device of the outside observer), *Sex* gradually coalesces into a novel organized around a single character (Carrie Bradshaw) and her friends. But so far from constituting grounds for aesthetic failure, this aspect of the book conveys something of the eighteenth-century excitement of a literary form being fitted to a reality it is trying to encompass. And even with the dissatisfying new chapters appended to the book after the success of the television show, the 2001 edition still offers a conclusion that departs from the standard one invented by Charlotte Brontë: instead of "Reader, I married him" (Brontë 426), "Carrie is happily single" (Bushnell 243). For this account of Bushnell's book I am indebted to Michael Piafsky, who taught me how to read and teach it in our Fall 2005 class Contemporary Fiction and the Publishing Industry.

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The Ends of America, the Ends of Postmodernism

Rachel Adams

If Los Angeles is the city that taught us how to be postmodern, might it also be the place where we begin to imagine what comes after? For well over 30 years, the architecture, demographics, lifestyles, and industries of Southern California have inspired countless essays and books on the nature and significance of postmodernity. Hollywood, Disneyland, the elevators at the Westin Bonaventure Hotel, the futuristic cityscapes of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner,* freeways, suburbs, shopping malls: these have become touchstones for some of the most influential reflections on the subject of American—and often global—postmodernism.[1] Thomas Pynchon wrote of the alienating, dystopian elements of postmodern California in his 1966 *The Crying of Lot 49,* where he described the road as a "hypodermic needle, inserted somewhere ahead into the vein of the freeway, a vein nourishing the mainliner L.A., keeping it happy, coherent, protected from pain, or whatever passes, with a city, for pain" (15). In the paranoid imaginings of his protagonist Oedipa Maas, traffic is an endless automated flow; the freeway exists less to facilitate human movement than to feed a city that craves only numbing, drug-induced happiness. Oedipa is little more than a pawn in a system too vast to be fully perceived or understood. Fast forward 30 years to *Tropic of Orange* by Karen Tei Yamashita, where the Los Angeles freeways are described by Manzanar, a man who gave up his home and his career as a surgeon to become a "conductor" of the vast symphony of urban life. As he stands on an overpass, "the great flow of humanity [runs] below and beyond his feet in every direction, pumping and pulsating, that blood connection, the great heartbeat of a great city" (35). Like Pynchon, Yamashita uses meta-

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phors of a living body to depict the freeway, but in this case its rhythms are those of human motion; traffic is not a narcotic artificially introduced into the system but the very lifeblood of the city, whose roads are "a great root system, an organic living entity" (37). These contrasting images are emblematic of fundamental differences between *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Tropic of Orange*, a novel that locates seismic shifts on the cultural horizon in the neighborhoods, traffic jams, and volatile borders of Southern California. Separated by 30 years, the two works can be read together as bookends bracketing one possible beginning and end to a particular kind of US literary postmodernism.

This essay proposes that *Tropic of Orange* represents an afterword to literary postmodernism that I will call the globalization of American literature. My observations originate from a growing sense that canonical works of postmodern literature no longer belong on the syllabus of my annual course on contemporary American fiction, which used to begin with *The Crying of Lot 49*. My students often respond to Pynchon's novel as if they were victims of a cruel hoax. They have little appreciation for its darkly comic ambiguities and are unfamiliar with historical and political allusions that once would have been immediately recognizable to its readers. Its depiction of the sharp polarization of the globe, fears of looming nuclear apocalypse, and newfound distrust of a government enmeshed in secrecy and conspiratorial activity represent the concerns of an earlier generation. They fail to see what is innovative about Pynchon's flat characters or the medium cool tones and playful self-reflexivity of his language. Their responses caused me to realize that in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Pynchon's novel has ceased to read as a work of contemporary fiction, even though many critics continue to use *postmodern* and *contemporary* as synonymous terms. While my students find *Tropic of Orange* no less challenging, they are willing to grapple with its difficulties because they recognize its form, which evokes the internet's polyvocality and time-space compression, and its themes—the human and environmental consequences of transformations taking place at America's borders—as belonging to their own contemporary moment. While these structural and thematic concerns may seem quite postmodern, Yamashita's novel situates them in relation to the vast inequities, economic interconnections, and movement of people and goods associated with globalization. In what follows, I will propose that the teaching and study of American literary history can benefit from more careful distinctions

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between the contemporary moment of globalization and its postmodern precursors.

My argument relies on an understanding of postmodernism as the dominant form of avant-garde literary experimentalism during the Cold War, a period marked by the ascendance of transnational corporations, the upheavals of decolonization, fears of nuclear holocaust, and the partitioning of the globe into ideological spheres. The dark humor; themes of paranoia, skepticism, and conspiracy; preoccupation with close reading and textuality; and complex formal experimentation characteristic of the most canonical works of postmodern literature can be historicized as a response to and reaction against what Alan Nadel has called the "containment culture" of Cold War America.[2] By this account, the formal and conceptual innovations of a group of authors that includes Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, Robert Coover, Don DeLillo, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Kurt Vonnegut, Kathy Acker, William Gaddis, William Gibson, and others belong to an era of literary history that came to an end in the late 1980s. This more historically and stylistically bounded understanding of literary postmodernism strikes me as more useful than one that extends from the years after World War II into the present. Examples of the latter include Michael Bérubé's proposition that postmodernism is a name for the era of globalization that we now inhabit and Marcel Cornis-Pope's division of postmodern literature into pre- and post-Cold War varieties. Most famously, Fredric Jameson describes postmodernism as the "cultural logic of late capitalism," a periodizing concept, but one with no apparent end in sight. Couched in such expansive terms, postmodernism is an unwieldy category that encompasses such strikingly different historical contexts and expressive forms that it threatens to become incoherent. Defining it more narrowly as a particularly successful mode of narrative experimentation that declined with the waning of the Cold War alleviates this problem and provides an opportunity to consider the distinctive features and historical circumstances of a new chapter in American literary history.

My provisional name for this chapter, American literary globalism, is intended to identify a constellation of authors who are reacting against the stylistic and conceptual premises of high postmodernism and responding to the intensification of global processes that were emergent during, but muted by, the phenomenon of Cold War.[3] These include the unprecedented integration of the world's markets, technologies, and systems of governance; surprising and innovative new forms of cultural fusion;

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and the mobilization of political coalitions across the lines of race, class, and other identitarian categories. For some, the perceived ubiquity of transnational corporations and increasing commodification of the world's cultures gave rise to fears about the impending demise of literary innovation. As Jonathan Franzen lamented in a controversial 1996 article:

> The world of the present is a world in which the rich lateral dramas of local manners have been replaced by a single, vertical drama, the drama of regional specificity succumbing to a commercial generality. The American writer today faces a totalitarianism analogous to the one with which two generations of Eastern bloc writers had to contend. To ignore it is to court nostalgia. To engage with it, however, is to risk writing fiction that makes the same point over and over: technological consumerism is an infernal machine, technological consumerism is an infernal machine. (43)

But while Franzen was decrying the numbing effects of global consumer culture, contemporary fiction in the US was being transformed by an infusion of new writers whose distinctive responses to the conditions of globalization were hardly in danger of making "the same point over and over." Many of these authors—Jhumpa Lahiri, Sandra Cisneros, Chang Rae Lee, Junot Diaz, Ruth Ozecki, Jessica Hagerdorn, Gish Jen, Bharati Mukherjee, Susan Choi, Oscar Hijuelos, Edwidge Danticat, and many others—were either the children of migrants or were themselves migrants who had come to the US as a result of the global upheavals of the past two decades. Relatively unburdened by the legacies of Euro-American modernism or the politics of the Cold War, their fiction reacts against the aesthetic sensibilities of high postmodernism while providing American literature with a new set of genealogical, geographic, and temporal referents.

In what follows, I read Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* as a novel that revises many of the themes and strategies employed by Pynchon in *The Crying of Lot 49*. I take these two novels as representative texts that might stand in for the larger shift from postmodernism to globalism as a dominant conceptual and thematic force in contemporary American fiction. I measure the distance between these categories in terms of their very different treatments of California and its environs, places that have so often been taken as a barometer of the American, and global, future.

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Pynchon depicts California as a place of suburban atomization. Located at the edge of the American frontier, it is a testament to the exhaustion of the westering impulse once seen as so vital to the nation's manifest destiny. The labyrinthine atmosphere of office parks, freeways, back alleys, and tract houses is echoed, at the level of form, in the novel's penchant for lists, catalogues, and circuitous narrative detours. Although *The Crying of Lot 49* satirizes the classic migratory pattern from Old World to New, its representation of California is also marked by recurrent allusions to Mexico, a place that might seem to promise alternatives to the fractured, apolitical society on the US side of the border. But instead, references to Mexican things and places simply add to the cluttered accumulation of signs that point to dead ends rather than progress. By contrast, Mexican history, people, and culture are the lifeblood of Yamashita's Southern California, which is literally being transformed by the momentous flows of people and culture from south of the border. Although *Tropic of Orange* is similarly complicated in terms of plot and narrative construction, its formal difficulties seem designed less to entrap both character and reader in a postmodern labyrinth than to evoke the dense networking of people and goods in an age of global interconnection. As Yamashita represents it, California is a nodal point where globalization threatens to erupt into environmental and human catastrophe, but also where people find themselves creating unlikely coalitions that might work to remedy these problems.

Postmodern Pynchon

The subject of well over a thousand critical articles, Thomas Pynchon may be the most frequently cited author in the vast scholarship on literary postmodernism.[4] The formal and thematic concerns expressed by his work—a preoccupation with paranoia and conspiracy, radical skepticism about foundational truth and authority of all kinds, deft mixing of genres, distrust of received historical knowledge, and confrontations with the sublime and apocalyptic—have come to define the study and teaching of postmodern fiction. Molly Hite describes Pynchon as "arguably the most important of postmodern novelists" (716), while Samuel Coale declares, without qualification, that Pynchon's writing reigns as "*the* postmodern vision above all others" (177). While *Gravity's Rainbow* is the Pynchon novel most frequently discussed by critics, the far shorter and more ac-

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cessible *The Crying of Lot 49* is most often assigned in the classroom, meaning that it may be the best known of all postmodern fictions. In thinking about what comes after postmodernism, it is worth revisiting *The Crying of Lot 49* in order to establish how this early novel set the terms by which several generations of readers have come to understand literary postmodernity.

The Crying of Lot 49 is structured like a frustrated detective story in which too many clues pile up, leading to ambiguity and confusion rather than insight. Although its generic form seems to suggest the purposive, goal-oriented progress of a quest, neither characters nor reader are any closer to insight by the novel's conclusion. Its governing metaphor is entropy, a figure for the exhaustion of closed systems and the overwhelming chaos of information overload.[5] Like her classical namesake, Oedipa Maas is surrounded by signs that seem to demand interpretation, but it is never clear whether they add up to a vast conspiracy or are merely symptoms of her own madness. "Why is everybody so interested in texts?" (61) asks the suicidal director Randolph Driblette, a question that identifies reading—of letters, plays, historical documents, graffiti, and the ubiquitous symbols that suddenly appear everywhere in Oedipa's world—as a fundamental activity in the narrative, but one that fails to yield productive forms of knowledge. Such moments of self-reflexivity turn the novel into an infinitely receding hall of mirrors in which words seem to have lost their ability to refer to anything other than themselves. The names of places and characters—Mike Fallopian, Genghis Cohen, Stanley Koteks, Mucho Maas, Dr. Hilarius, the Yoyodyne Corporation, San Narciso—cry out for explication that will ultimately fail to yield any particular significance. Reading is what inaugurates Oedipa's quest when she notices a stamp cancelled with the words "REPORT ALL OBSCENE MAIL TO YOUR POTSMASTER" (33). Is this a simple misprint, as her lawyer Metzger suggests, or is it a subversive message associated with the underground postal network Oedipa comes to know as the Tristero/Trystero system? And is her world a legible document whose signs, if accurately interpreted, will point the way toward an underlying meaning, or is her effort to find meaning merely a defense against the world's randomness and chaos? Is the reader, whose progress so closely parallels Oedipa's own, trapped within a similarly confining network of signs? At the novel's end, these questions are left unresolved as Oedipa awaits the eponymous "crying of lot 49" (152), the call of an auctioneer that may reveal the

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source of the mysterious clues or draw her further into a self-referential labyrinth that will never lead to revelation or knowledge. Paranoia is the novel's reigning sensibility, a sentiment that Patrick O'Donnell calls "the symptomatic condition of postmodernity" (qtd. in Coale 5). This, coupled with what Thomas Schaub describes as its "necessary ambiguity" (67), its playful self-reflexivity, evident delight in incoherence and uncertainty, and depiction of the world as a text that offers an excess of signs while frustrating signification, have led many critics to declare *The Crying of Lot 49* a paradigmatic instance of literary postmodernism.

Few critical readings of *The Crying of Lot 49* remark on its treatment of place, despite the fact that it anticipates the writings of the many critics who would find California the locus of postmodernity in the 1980s and 1990s. Pynchon's California is a place that values superficiality over depth, a state where neighborhoods and downtowns have been eradicated in favor of vast, sprawling networks of freeway, and where faceless new information industries have made workers ever more alienated from the products of their labor. Wandering the impersonal, maze-like halls of the Yoyodyne corporation, Oedipa comes across the engineer Stanley Koteks, who laments: "Nobody wanted them to invent—only perform their little role in a design ritual, already set down for them in some procedures handbook" (70). Yoyodyne is located in San Narciso, a suburb of Los Angeles that is "like many named places in California, [. . .] less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts—census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway" (13). The suburbs of Southern California are isolated pods connected by endless miles of freeway; residents no longer live in cities unified around a central core but in "concepts" determined by negotiations among corporations, developers, and politicians. The sense of alienation projected by these locations is amplified by the novel's disorienting treatment of space. Although Oedipa spends a lot of time driving, her journey is not described in a way that could be plotted on a map. The pileup of metaphors and catalogues gives the impression that her movements could as easily be taking place within her own tortured interiority as across a physical landscape.

Pynchon's California is the setting for a parodic rendition of the classic American narratives of immigration and westward movement. Adherents of the underground network called the Tristero/Trystero left Europe

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after losing their aristocratic patronage, arrived in the US, and migrated to the West Coast. As the historian Emory Bortz explains to Oedipa:

> other immigrants come to America looking for freedom from tyranny, acceptance by the culture, assimilation into it, this melting pot. Civil War comes along, most of them, being liberals, sign up to fight to preserve the Union. But clearly not the Tristero. All they've done is to change oppositions. (143)

The Tristero/Trystero cannot be equated with other persecuted groups who have come to America to ensure the perpetuation or defense of their political ideals. Although they are a dissenting minority, their secret machinations are motivated by nothing more than resistance for its own sake. Their purposeless opposition makes sense in the context of a Southern California where life has become so standardized and claustrophobic that any sign of protest can be seen as a welcome assertion of agency, yet it also points to a depressingly reduced conception of the dissent so integral to the American national consciousness.

The Tristero/Trystero's seemingly pointless acts of subversion are echoed in Oedipa's experience of UC Berkeley, celebrated home of the free-speech and antiwar movements. Returning to the campus where she was once a student, Oedipa feels estranged from the new spirit of activism she encounters there, prompting her to wonder:

> where were Secretaries James and Foster and Senator Joseph, those dear daft numina who'd mothered over [her] so temperate youth? [. . .] Among them they had managed to turn the young Oedipa into a rare creature indeed, unfit perhaps for marches and sit-ins, but just a whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts. (83)

Raised to perceive the most controversial politicians of her time as "dear daft numina," Oedipa is more suited to literary than political analysis. During this visit to Berkeley, she finds a bewildering array of "swaying card tables, long paper petitions dangling to the earth, posters for undecipherable FSM's, YAF's, VDC's, suds in the fountain, students in nose to nose dialogue" (83), but these signs of political awareness are evacuated of significance, their meaning inchoate as anything else in the novel. Trained as a good close reader, Oedipa is alienated by the notion of the university as a place where students are taught to be critics of their world rather

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than of texts. As O'Donnell describes her development over the course of the novel:

> literate, suspicious, and sensitive (like any good New Critic) to the subtleties of paradox and ambiguity, the more information Oedipa gathers, the more connections she finds, confirming her sense that she is part of some tangled network of linkages whose origins and ends ever recede into obfuscation as the information mounts. (191)

Feeling herself constrained by conspiratorial forces too vast and complex to ever be fully understood, Oedipa behaves like an ideal Cold War subject by seeking out irony and contradiction rather than understanding herself as a political agent. When Metzger jokes about the authorities "pressing the wrong button" (33), he underscores the sense of civic disempowerment and insecurity associated with the early Cold War period, in which nuclear apocalypse could just as plausibly come about from a mistake made by one's own government as an enemy attack.[6] These details anchor *The Crying of Lot 49* in its historical moment, a decade that included the United States' escalating involvement in Vietnam, the Cuban missile crisis, and the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union. The novel's emphasis on texts and close reading, its thematization of paranoia and conspiracy, and its pessimism about the possibility of political resistance all might be understood as reflections on a geopolitical context in which ordinary citizens feel alienated and disempowered by the political process.

Another distinguishing feature of Pynchon's California is its palpable proximity to Mexico, which seems as if it must provide a vital key to unlocking the mysteries of the text. When Pierce's sanity begins to slip, one of his personae speaks in "hostile Pachuco dialect" (2); Oedipa's husband Mucho sells used cars to poor Mexicans; John Nefastis lives in a "pseudo-Mexican apartment house" (83); and Oedipa wanders into "an all-night Mexican greasy spoon" (96) in San Francisco. Such ubiquitous allusions to Mexico and Mexicans might be read as yet another set of clues, autobiographical traces of the author's stay in Mexico City from 1960 to 1962 while writing his celebrated first novel, *V.* The Mexican capital is the scene of an apocryphal story in which Pynchon managed to evade a magazine photographer who had been sent to take his picture, never again to appear in the media spotlight. So too Mexicanisms in *The Crying of Lot 49* might provide another way to locate the novel in its historical and

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geographic context. During the Cold War, Mexico was perceived as an important ally of the United States, its geographical position providing a buffer against the incipient communism of other Latin American nations. Mexico's newfound financial and political stability made it a model for the possibilities of democratic progress in the region. At the same time, its association with a violent and exotic revolutionary past enticed more radical Americans with the possibility of escape from the stultifying political atmosphere of the United States. But to read Pynchon's Mexico as either an autobiographical or sociopolitical referent would be to miss the point. In keeping with the novel's postmodern sensibility, its Mexicanisms are more like so much background noise, adding to the clutter of signs whose meaning may amount to no more than endless deferral and information overload. Mexico itself is less important as a literal place than as a figure for the impossibility of self-knowledge or certitude. It appears to Oedipa as a way to liberate herself from the feminine mystique of Tupperware parties, housework, and marriage, but what she discovers is that her neuroses cannot be left behind through physical travel. While vacationing with Pierce in Mexico City, Oedipa contemplates a painting by the surrealist Remedios Varo in which the image of frail girls imprisoned "in the top room of a circular tower" (11) mirrors back her own sense of claustrophobia and confinement by forces she cannot understand. She realizes that instead of finding a retreat, she has reached a place that is "only by accident known as Mexico, and so Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there'd been no escape" (11). This Mexico is less a real locale than a name for one of many forms of restless disappointment that precede Oedipa's quest to understand the Tristero system.

Mexico is also linked to the exhaustion of the revolutionary energies that surface over the course of the novel without amounting to anything. During her visit to Berkeley, Oepida finds the campus "more akin to those Far Eastern or Latin American universities you read about . . . the sort that bring governments down" (83), but despite this passing reference to the political promises of decolonization, there is no suggestion that such potential will ever by realized on US soil. What is more likely is that these middle-class American students are simply mimicking the behavior that led to revolutions elsewhere in the world. And there is little hope for such cataclysmic change in the figure of the exiled Mexican revolutionary Jesus Arabal, whom Oedipa comes across while wandering the streets

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of San Francisco. Arabal is an acquaintance from her travels in Mazatlán and a member of the Mexican CIA, a clandestine anarchist organization that traces its history back to such notorious revolutionaries as Emiliano Zapata and the Flores Magón brothers. When Pierce and Oedipa meet him in Mexico, Arabal was waiting for an antigovernment rally to which nobody showed up. Arabal's faith in the need for resistance is restored by his chance encounter with Pierce, whom he finds to be the purest embodiment of bourgeois privilege and thus the perfect target of his political struggles. Oedipa questions whether Arabal's fate would have been different had the meeting never taken place: "she wondered if, without the miracle of Pierce to reassure him, Jesus might not have quit his CIA eventually and gone over like everybody else to the majority priistas, and so never had to go into exile" (98). For both Oedipa and Arabal, Pierce is a connective link who makes them believe that otherwise random events might be part of a larger design. Yet the alternatives Oedipa imagines for the Mexican Arabal are equally bleak: were he not an impoverished exile in the United States, where his revolutionary energies have no outlet, he would have been absorbed into the political machinery of Mexico's ruling party, the PRI. Like the girls in the Remedios Varo painting, Arabal can find no way out of this confining circularity. Mexico, as it is portrayed in *The Crying of Lot 49,* is neither an escape, as Oedipa wishes it to be, nor a place to realize alternatives to the limited political horizons of the United States.

The representation of Mexico in *The Crying of Lot 49* might stand in as a paradigm for Pynchon's postmodernism, especially when it is read against a more recent novel like *Tropic of Orange.* Mexico could serve as the source of political resistance, personal realization, or a means of anchoring the novel in time and space. But like the other apparent clues promised by Pynchon's text, it becomes yet another signifier unmoored from its referents in the surrounding world. It resists an interpretation that would seek cultural or historical significance, pointing instead to close-reading strategies designed to uncover irony and ambiguity. In this, the postmodernism of Pynchon's novel powerfully reflects on the atmosphere of its Cold War moment. Its themes and strategies must be seen in historical terms, as the expressions particular to a time and place that is now nearly half a century in the past.

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Global California in *Tropic of Orange*

Recall that when Oedipa Maas describes the freeways of Southern California, she likens them to the veins of a drug addict "nourishing the mainliner L.A." Whereas Pynchon uses a passive construction—the road as a "hypodermic needle inserted" by an unknown agent—Karen Tei Yamashita's language emphasizes the human activity that turns the freeway system into "an organic living entity" (37). These differing conceptions of character and language are a good place to begin a consideration of how the concerns of contemporary fiction have changed over time, turning literary postmodernism into a historical category rather than a description of the present. While they may seem an unlikely pair, *Tropic of Orange* and *The Crying of Lot 49* share elements of plot and form that make them ideally suited for comparative analysis. A significant portion of both novels takes place in a dystopian Southern California, which becomes a microcosm of broader geopolitical tensions of its time. And both novels are ironic, formally experimental, and highly allusive, borrowing from multiple genres, including the noir/detective novel so closely associated with Southern California locales. But three decades after the publication of *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Tropic of Orange* looks to different sources of inspiration, historical contexts, and geographic frames from those favored by its postmodern precursor.

In an interview conducted shortly after the publication of *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita remarked that "in 1991, if you had said I was doing a 'postmodern project,' I'd have thought, 'What the hell is that?'" (qtd. in Gier and Tejada). Despite her disclaimer, it isn't surprising that *Tropic of Orange* frequently appears on syllabi of courses in postmodern literature, since it shares certain structural and thematic concerns with experimental fiction of previous decades. The alternative networks of communication anticipated by Pynchon's Tristero/Trystero system are fully realized in Yamashita's work, where the internet is both a metaphor for global interconnectedness and the novel's organizational principle. *Tropic of Orange* begins with a grid titled "hypercontexts" that lays out the correspondence between its seven plotlines and the days of the week during which the action takes place. Although this map locates the central characters in time and space, it also provides a deceptive sense of order to a narrative that ultimately refuses to come together in any coherent manner. The identification of spatiotemporal coordinates cannot explain the mysterious events

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that unfold over the course of the week, which include a smuggling ring that kidnaps small children for their organs; the appearance of poisoned oranges on the supermarket shelves of California; a massive accident that brings the rush-hour freeway to a standstill; an uprising of homeless Angelenos; seismic shifts in L.A.'s urban geography; strange mutations in regional weather, flora, and fauna; and a 500-year-old man so strong that he can pull a bus with cables hooked to his own body. Like *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Tropic of Orange* presents an overload of events and information that makes it difficult to distinguish relevant clues from background noise. As Gabriel, the novel's erstwhile detective, concludes:

> I no longer looked for a resolution to the loose threads hanging off my storylines. If I had begun to understand anything, I now knew they were simply the warp and woof of a fraying net of conspiracies in an expanding universe where the holes only seemed to get larger and larger. (249)

Although these holes are no closer to being filled by the novel's end, Gabriel has come to accept the uncertainty of his chaotic, transitional environment by recognizing its likeness to the ubiquitous technology of the internet.

The figure most closely associated with a postmodern worldview in *Tropic of Orange* is Gabriel's girlfriend Emi, the hip, hypercontemporary TV producer who is "so distant from the Asian female stereotype—it was questionable if she even had an identity" (19). Emi loves speed, surfaces, and the newest technologies. Disdainful of Gabriel's passion for film noir, she has a television that can project four different stations simultaneously so that "at any moment, she could judge which channel had the more exciting screen" (125). A woman whose reality is confirmed only when she sees it on the evening news, who rejects tradition and declares that "cultural diversity is bullshit" (128), Emi seems to represent the future that many critics have associated, for better or worse, with Southern California.[7] That is, until she becomes the casualty of a drive-by shooting while sunning herself on the roof of the *Newsnow* van. Caught on film, her demise will be endlessly replayed for TV viewers so that "in this sense, she would never die" (250). Ironic to the very end, her final question is yet another stab at Gabriel's beloved film noir: "what color is blood in . . . black and . . . white?" (252). Her last words are a comic recognition of her failure to interface completely

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with the computerized technologies that have defined her life: "Abort. Retry. Ignore. Fail . . ." The shallow theatricality of Emi's death could not be more postmodern. But her unsentimental elimination also suggests that she is no longer useful, that the future belongs instead to characters like Gabriel or the community organizer Buzzworm, who are both more respectful of the past and willing to harbor utopian visions of the future. Indeed, Yamashita's decision to kill off her character seems to repudiate the postmodern "waning of affect" famously described by Fredric Jameson (10) by leaving the world to those with deeper commitments and belief in the possibility of social change.

Emi's death might stand in for the novel's rejection of the superficiality and relentless irony of postmodern aesthetics that her character represents. Rather than categorizing *Tropic of Orange* as a work of postmodern fiction, I would argue that the novel is more aptly described as a reaction to and an effort to move beyond its experimental precursors. Indeed, despite certain similarities with earlier works of experimental fiction, *Tropic of Orange* was unrecognizable to the major publishers who had been printing the work of high postmodernists like Pynchon since the 1960s. Even editors who appreciated the well-established conventions of postmodern literary experimentation declared it to be—in Yamashita's words—"too experimental and [they] didn't want the politics" (qtd. in Gier and Tejada). Yamashita eventually placed her novel with the small nonprofit Coffee House Press, which is dedicated to publishing the work of underrepresented authors. Yamashita and her work may have been inscrutable to publishers for several reasons. Although she describes herself as an Asian American writer, she does not fit easily into conventional understandings of this category. She began her literary career in Latin America, where she intended to write an oral history of Japanese women immigrants living in Brazilian agricultural communes. After becoming frustrated with conventional historical and ethnographic forms, she turned to fiction as a more appropriate means of capturing the "truth" of her subjects. Since her return to the US, Yamashita has written fiction, poetry, and performance pieces that consistently tie the history and culture of Asian America into the broader framework of the Americas and the planet.[8] Her work is part of the explosion of ethnic American writing that has changed the contours of fiction in the US since the late 1980s, but it also expresses the more global, multiethnic perspectives of a generation that is refashioning older understandings of identity and politics. Although

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some critics include this kind of writing in the rubric of postmodern fiction, its reception by publishers is evidence that it represents a significant departure that calls out for a new category altogether.

In *Tropic of Orange,* the Cold War vision of the globe that so dominates the texts of high postmodernism is replaced by other geopolitical cleavages. The novel's imagined geographies are informed by the massive demographic and perspectival shifts introduced by contemporary globalization and linked to the long history of conquest and colonization in the Americas. Whereas the genealogy of the Tristero/Trystero in *The Crying of Lot 49* is rooted in the history of transatlantic immigration, *Tropic of Orange* emphasizes the violence and destruction wrought by earlier European arrivals on the American continent. Its vision of America's future is tied to Latin America and Asia. Archangel, a supernatural figure who appears in the guises of migrant worker, streetcorner prophet, performance artist, and Mexican wrestler, is the primary link to the hemisphere's bloody past and the promise in its future. His performances and spontaneous "political poetry" remind audiences of another American history formed by New World slavery, thefts of land, failed uprisings, and revolutions. As its epigraph explains, *Tropic of Orange* is also about "the recent past; a past that, even as you imagine it, happens." Published in 1997, the novel alludes to a "recent past" that includes many events of global significance—the signing of NAFTA, the war on drugs, the tightening of immigration restrictions—that are felt with particular intensity in Southern California because of its proximity to the US-Mexico border.

Focusing on the US-Mexico border is one way that the novel draws attention to the divide between North and South that Immanuel Wallerstein has described as one of the great geopolitical polarities of the twenty-first century (280–88). While this division is not new, its consequences have become more apparent in the absence of Cold War ideological conflicts and the growth of the global economy. As we have seen, *The Crying of Lot 49* also looks south of the US border. But the relationship of North to South in *Tropic of Orange* means something quite different from its meaning in *The Crying of Lot 49,* where Oedipa comes to realize—in a place "only by accident known as Mexico"—that her location is relatively unimportant, since revelation could have come in any number of places. By contrast, US-Mexico relations are absolutely crucial to Yamashita's narrative design, for they represent both the most destructive aspects of globalization and the inspired fusion of people and cultures

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resulting from northward migration. So vital is this connection that at one point in the novel L.A. is described as "the Village of the Queen of the Angels of Porcuincula, the second largest city of Mexico, also known as Los Angeles" (211). Mazatlán—a romantic retreat for Oedipa and Pierce Inverarity—is also the location for the first chapter of *Tropic of Orange*, which takes place in a vacation home bought by Gabriel in an attempt to rediscover his Mexican roots. Moving back and forth between the US and Mexico, the novel reflects on a post-NAFTA context in which the international border has become a vital node in the global economy and a focus of concerns about national security as well as a constant reminder of the inextricable fusion of Latin and Anglo American cultures. The signing of CAFTA (the Central American Free Trade Agreement) in July 2005, combined with ongoing debates about immigration and domestic security, have ensured the ongoing currency of the topical questions raised by *Tropic of Orange* in the early twentieth-first century.

Yamashita's concern with the interrelation of North and South is manifest at the level of style as well as content. *Tropic of Orange* depicts an unstoppable flow of people and goods moving back and forth between the US and Mexico despite the most vigilant forms of border security. The novel illustrates the affirmative consequences of these flows in its creative fusion of Latin American-inspired magical realism with allusions to such Anglo-American sources as hard-boiled detective fiction and Hollywood film. Of course, *The Crying of Lot 49* is also a generic hybrid, but its references to physics, classical mythology, Renaissance drama, and Freudian psychoanalysis are largely European in orientation. Among the authors Yamashita cites as influences are Pablo Neruda, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Gabriel García Marquez, as well as the "border brujo" performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña, who is the inspiration for the fantastical character of Archangel (Gier and Tejada). The use of Spanish-language words and phrases, supernatural events such as the literal movement of the border, the battle between the jaguar and the serpent, and references to mythical figures like Limpião and La Malinche all reflect the imprint of Latin American narrative traditions. The inspired melding of Northern and Southern cultural forms is further evident in the novel's structure, which vacillates between the linear, goal-oriented model of plot development of the Anglo-American detective novel and cyclical understandings of time indebted to Amerindian sources such as the Mayan codices. The nonlinear conception of history is most fully articulated by Archangel,

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who prophesies a pattern of violence and renewal "based on the ancient belief that doom comes in fifty-two-year cycles" (48). This view is anticipated by the opening "hypercontexts," many of which gesture to cyclical structures like times of day, days of the week, and seasons. Based on indigenous American understandings of temporality, the circular conception of history expressed by Archangel, in which the angry and dispossessed people of the South periodically rise up against their Northern oppressors, contrasts with the linearity of the Western calendar and the weakened sense of historicity posited by Jameson as a feature of the postmodern moment. Yamashita's engagement with multiple literary precursors points to a more historically engaged and geographically expansive American archive than that of the high postmodernists, whose preoccupation with the Cold War often leads them to conflate America with the United States.

The "hypercontexts" at the opening of *Tropic of Orange* also set the stage for a narrative written in many different voices and dialects, from Emi's fast-talking hipster vernacular to the streetwise cadences of Buzzworm and the immigrant Bobby Ngu to the earnest reflections of the Mexican housekeeper Rafaela and the political poetry of Archangel. This chorus of voices is another way of distinguishing *Tropic of Orange* from *The Crying of Lot 49*, which is told exclusively from Oedipa's point of view. Of course, polyvocality is a strategy employed by many high postmodernists. However, they tend to use it as a sign of authorial mastery, whereas Yamashita's technique, which is clearly inspired by her ambivalent experiences as an ethnographer, seems designed to channel the voices of those who have been silenced from the historical record. Within the novel itself, Archangel assumes this task when he appears in the guise of many different populist figures, each with a distinctive voice and point of view. In the climactic showdown he appears as a Mexican wrestler named EL GRAN MOJADO, who announces that *"My struggle is for all of you"* (133). Of his antagonist, the robotic SUPERNAFTA, who claims to represent progress, technology, and commerce, EL GRAN MOJADO tells his audience:

> He is only concerned with the
> commerce of money and things.
> What is this compared to the great
> commerce of humankind?

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In contrast to the injustice inevitably involved in the "commerce of money and things," "the great commerce of humankind" represented by Archangel/EL GRAN MOJADO is a dialogue inclusive of many voices. *Tropic of Orange* models that commerce by presenting a story that must be told by multiple characters from across the spectrum of race, class, gender, and geography.

As the novel illustrates, the conflict between these two forms of commerce is amplified by the conditions of contemporary globalization, which have resulted in the dispersal and intensification of economic disparities. But globalization has also given rise to new modes of protest that Nick Dyer-Witheford labels the "new combinations" and Giovanni Arrighi, Terrence K. Hopkins, and Wallerstein call "antisystemic movements." According to Dyer-Witheford, the "new combinations" are political networks that bypass traditional coalitional categories, giving rise to "a proliferation of concrete utopianisms envisaging ways more or less outside or beyond the market system" (194). These innovative forms of mobilization are as much a product of the age of globalization as are the great inequities and threat of cultural homogeneity associated with the spread of transnational capital. In *Tropic of Orange* the potential of the "new combinations" is best represented by the homeless Angelenos who invade the freeway after a massive accident brings traffic to a standstill. Less systematic and secretive than Pynchon's Tristero/Trystero, their activities are spontaneous, collective, and dangerously anarchic. This revolution is fully televised. In a carnivalesque reversal, cars abandoned by their owners are taken over by the indigent, who treat them as homes rather than means of transportation. While everyone knows the situation is temporary, there is the suggestion that it may have more enduring consequences for the city as a whole. Significantly, Buzzworm notices,

> amazing thing was everybody in L.A. was walking. They just had no choice. There wasn't a transportation artery that a vehicle could pass through. It was a big-time thrombosis. Massive stroke. Heart attack. You name it. The whole system was coagulating then and there [. . .] Only way to navigate it was to feel the streets with your own two feet.
>
> So people were finally getting out, close to the ground, seeing the city like he did. (219)

Using the by-now familiar metaphor of the city as body, Buzzworm real-

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izes that even if L.A. suffers a debilitating illness, its human inhabitants will persist, rediscovering forgotten means of conveyance and perception. In the novel, the dreaded gridlock does not bring urban life to an end. Instead, the crisis forces people to see and feel the city differently, as they experience it by foot. And perhaps, the novel suggests, these new experiences, like the L.A. riots of 1992, might lead to lasting changes in the way that individuals and communities perceive one another.

Such changes remain unrealized on the horizon in *Tropic of Orange*. It is possible that they will never materialize. The freeway could be cleaned up, SUPERNAFTA could recover from his wounds, and life in Los Angeles could return to its regular patterns. However, the novel also persistently intimates that history need not proceed only in terms of the cycles of doom predicted by Archangel. If characters like Buzzworm and Gabriel do not succeed in realizing their utopian projects, they also are not defeated. The mass movement of people and land that takes place over the course of the narrative suggests a mounting crisis, a coming wave of humanity that cannot be turned back, that promises to "crush itself into every pocket and crevice, filling a northern vacuum with its cultural conflicts, political disruption, romantic language, with its one hundred years of solitude and its tropical sadness" (170–71). Like many recent social critics ranging across the political spectrum from Mike Davis to Samuel Huntington,[9] the novel insists that this meeting between North and South is inevitable, but it does not disclose whether its consequences will be catastrophic or inspiring. It ends ambiguously with the fall of EL GRAN MOJADO but also with the reunion of a truly global family—the Singaporean Bobby, Mexican Rafaela, and their son Sol—in Los Angeles. There is no suggestion that the seething crowds who followed Archangel to the North plan to return home; if they remain they will further contribute to the Latinization of Southern California. Despite its unresolved ending, *Tropic of Orange* leaves its audiences in a very different position than does *The Crying of Lot 49*, where the reader, as Hite describes, must conclude that her "own world is a text that behaves in the same way [as the novel], inscribing ostentatiously free agents in preexisting stories that ultimately determine them" (716). Yamashita's readers may feel alarmed at the environmental and human catastrophes—global warming, poverty, urban violence, civil war—that threaten to erupt just beyond the novel's frame, but they will not find themselves confined in a claustrophobically self-referential fiction designed to mirror a lack of agency over their own

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lives. Indeed, their position is more akin to the inhabitants of gridlocked L.A. Being stuck in traffic does not mean they are immobile. Rather, they are confronted by circumstances that force them outside the enclosed boundaries of the stories that they know, causing them to see and feel the world differently.

Reflecting on the future of cultural studies, Michael Denning writes:

> a central task of a transnational cultural studies is to narrate an account of globalization that speaks not just of an abstract market with buyers and sellers, or even of an abstract commodification with producers and consumers, but of actors: transnational corporations, social movements of students, market women, tenants, radicalized and ethnicized migrants, labor unions, and so on. (28–29)

As students and teachers of contemporary literature know well, fiction is often one step ahead of cultural studies, particularly when it comes to representing the agency of those who are typically depicted only as demographic abstractions. *Tropic of Orange* is about the way that populations from many different national and economic backgrounds come together in Los Angeles, where they variously champion, are victimized by, or simply live in the circumstances of globalization. In keeping with Yamashita's interest in oral history, the novel aspires to channel multiple voices, particularly those that have historically been silenced or marginalized. To say that *Tropic of Orange* provides the ingredients for the "account of globalization" Denning is calling for is not to claim that it represents its moment more accurately than does *The Crying of Lot 49*, but rather to underscore the extent to which the two works belong to different chapters in literary history. These novels are an ideal pair because each translates the cultural and political dilemmas of its time into the aesthetic and thematic innovations of narrative fiction. Any attempt to define what makes Yamashita's moment distinctive will require different forms of literacy, historical knowledge, and attention to emergent sensibilities that break from earlier understandings of "the contemporary."

One promising avenue in Americanist literary history is the recent realignment of the field's geographic parameters to reflect multiple Americas that are more mobile and expansive than the borders of the US nation-

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state. As we have seen, Yamashita's imagined geographies are informed by a heightened awareness of how America is being transformed by the massive demographic and perspectival shifts wrought by globalization. Since the 1990s, many critics have proposed that nation-bound categories of literary study be replaced by alternative geographical frames such as the Caribbean, the Americas, the Black, the trans- or circum-Atlantic, the Pacific Rim, continents, hemispheres, and worlds.[10] In Americanist literary study, such creative remapping has helped to bring attention to underrepresented authors, yielded innovative combinations of authors, and shed fresh light on well-known works. In a parallel development, many works of contemporary US fiction recognize a planet that is tied together through the increasing interpenetration of economies, cultures, and kinship. If postmodernism is governed by a sense of paranoia, which suggests that these connections may be figments of an individual imagination, the literature of globalization represents them as a shared perception of community whereby, for better or worse, populations in one part of the world are inevitably affected by events in another.

If the postmodern vision of global geography is filtered through Cold War divisions and anxieties, contemporary US fiction takes other spatial and ideological imaginaries as its setting. It draws on a global archive of literary traditions in its search for innovative formal strategies. Of course, for over a century modernism and then postmodernism have relied on allusions to multiple languages and traditions. But contemporary US fictions tend to frame such borrowings differently, in terms of the contact among people and cultures resulting from globalization. It seems premature to say exactly what the reigning thematic and aesthetic sensibilities of the era of American literary globalism will be, given the difficulties of defining any form of cultural expression at the moment of its emergence. What this kind of comparative reading can accomplish most productively is to generate a more precise understanding of literary postmodernism, one that does not encompass anything and everything but sees it as a set of innovative narrative responses to the cultural conditions of its time. What better place to start identifying its successor than California, whose constantly shifting landscapes and populations have given rise to some of America's most apocalyptic nightmares, as well as its fondest utopian hopes for the future?

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Notes

1. These include works by Janet Abu-Lughod, Jean Baudrillard, Umberto Eco, Fredric Jameson, and Edward Soja.

2. See also Ann Douglas and Patrick O'Donnell.

3. For varying examples of this terminology, see Samir Amin, Arjun Appadurai, Thomas Friedman, and Saskia Sassen.

4. To put this in some perspective, there are 1,184 articles on Pynchon in the MLA database, compared with 886 on Gertrude Stein, 649 on Ralph Ellison, and 395 on John Dos Passos, three of the most important US modernists of the previous generation.

5. See Gordon Slethaug xvi.

6. This sentiment was dramatized on film just two years earlier in Sidney Lumet's *Fail-Safe* and its darkly comic counterpart, Stanley Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove.*

7. See Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* and *Ecology of Fear,* Jameson, and Soja.

8. See also Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rainforest, Brazil Maru,* and *Circle K Cycles.*

9. See Davis's *Magical Urbanism* and Huntington's "The Hispanic Challenge."

10. See for example Jane C. Desmond and Virginia R. Dominguez, Claire Fox and Claudia Sadowski-Smith, Paul Giles, Paul Gilroy, Gregory S. Jay, Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, John Muthyala, Carolyn Porter, Joseph Roach, John Carlos Rowe's "Nineteenth-Century US Literary Culture and Transnationality" and *Post-Nationalist American Studies,* Jose David Saldivar, and Doris Sommer.

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Against the Ontology of the Present: Paul Auster's Cinematographic Fictions

Timothy Bewes

> In the "cinema" . . . man has lost his soul; in return, however, he gains his body.
>
> —Georg Lukács ("Thoughts" 16)

If we agree with Fredric Jameson that historicizing works of literature is always necessary (*Political Unconscious* 9), recent fiction poses a particular challenge, not so much because of the difficulty of gaining critical distance on our own times but because the very idea of contemporaneity, of the present, has recently become implicated as never before in the way we read literature. The first task in historicizing contemporary fiction, I will suggest, should be to historicize the concept of contemporaneity. This means beginning to dissolve the ideological and historical congelation that is implied in a phrase such as "the cultural logic of late capitalism." My argument in this essay will be that "postmodernity," the most influential recent theorization of the "present," has for the most part constituted an obstacle to this historicization of contemporaneity; that it has, moreover, privileged the "present" as a principle that, in effect, stands outside its own historicity. Jameson's powerful diagnosis of "a certain spatial turn" in the postmodern (*Postmodernism* 154) has, under the sign of historicization, functioned to crystallize a sense of the contemporary as such—as something that may be subjected to scrutiny and analysis. Jameson's diagnosis, furthermore, is itself premised on an already spatialized concept of time: "If experience and expression still seem largely apt in the cultural sphere of the modern," he writes, "they are altogether *out of place* and anachronistic in a postmodern age, where, if temporality still

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has its place, it would seem better to speak of the writing of it than of any lived experience" (154; my italics). The synonymy of displacement and anachronism in this sentence is emblematic of a spatiotemporal logic at work, in which history is conceived as a succession of discrete presents separated by ruptures, crises, and epistemic breaks. Jameson's "spatial turn," in other words, is presupposed rather than derived, or to put it another way, the argument that temporal experience has been *replaced* by the spatial is a self-fulfilling one, a tautology.

The claim that postmodernity has ended and the question of what will follow it are similarly dependent on this spatialized understanding of time and temporality. Indeed, Jameson himself (using the oxymoronic phrase *full postmodernity*) has recently begun to talk of the postmodern in the past tense (*Singular Modernity* 1, 6). The task of theorizing what comes after the postmodern, then, may well have to begin by challenging the spatialized notion of the postmodern as an epoch that may be succeeded by anything at all. To this end, I will consider the postmodern ontology of the present (as I call it) alongside earlier attempts to theorize the contemporary—most notably Georg Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel,* which puts forward an epochal notion of "absolute sinfulness" as the defining principle of the novel form. My intention is to decant what is essential to and credible in the postmodern hypothesis from the propensity to delimit it historically. Interestingly, several years before he wrote *The Theory of the Novel,* Lukács put forward a less ontologically benighted theory of aesthetic form in a short article on the aesthetics of cinema, where cinema is differentiated from theater on the basis of its presentation of "movement in itself, an eternal variability, the never-resting change of things" ("Thoughts" 15). Cinema, claims Lukács, introduces an "entirely different metaphysics"—different not only from theater but also from the ontology of interior and exterior, subject and object, implied in literature's dependence on the word.

In the light of this contiguity of cinema and the novel in Lukács's early work, I propose here a reading of two recent fictional works by Paul Auster in which the tension between a spatial ontology of temporality and a more sensuous temporality, liberated from space, is staged as an encounter between novelistic and cinematic form. Auster, I argue, is as transfixed by the spatiohistorical narrative as Lukács and Jameson; and yet the captivation by cinema apparent in his recent work—albeit ultimately disavowed in the texts discussed here—illustrates the extent to which so-

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called postmodern fiction is drawn toward that which would liberate it from that very category, conceived of as a historical, periodizing one. If postmodern narrative strategies are to be succeeded by anything, it will be by an "entirely different metaphysics," one which, however, is imaginatively configured within postmodern theory itself, as well as in Lukács's theory of the novel and in the yearning of Paul Auster's recent fictions for the immediacy of cinema.

The ideology of contemporaneity

The central assertions of postmodern theory, in the US at least, have been formulated on the basis and in the aftermath of Jameson's "spatial turn," and they have tended similarly to introduce a set of spatially conceived tropes to the interpretation of culture. *Intertextuality, irony, double-coding* (a term coined by Charles Jencks, referring to the "peaceful co-existence" of different architectural styles in a single work, and to their "simultaneous validity" [288–89]), *self-referentiality,* and *metafiction* have been imposed on literary texts in particular, with the result that postmodern fiction, and "postmodernity" in general, have been understood in terms of banality, depthlessness, cynicism, alienation, sterility, political defeat, the totality of commodification—in short, as a set of cultural practices in which inhere the failure of art and the impossibility of expression. Jameson's claim that postmodern forms represent "the cultural logic of late capitalism" serves as a principle of hermeneutic delimitation, to be ranged alongside other such ontologizing moments as Charles Newman's statement that contemporary American literature presents "the flattest possible characters in the flattest possible landscape rendered in the flattest possible diction"; David Harvey's use of terms such as *plunder, amnesia,* and *spectacle* to describe the relation of postmodern aesthetics to history (54); even Ihab Hassan's earlier, more nuanced diagnosis of postmodernism as a literature of "exhaustion" and "silence" (268). These statements, at least in their crudest form, represent variations on the claim that the contemporary period is one in which events are no longer possible; that history has—in a sense not nearly so removed from Francis Fukuyama's thesis as these thinkers imagine—ended.

A more recent version of this historiography of critical decline is found in the work of Walter Benn Michaels, who, in *The Shape of the Signifier,* identifies a broad shift across a range of recent works of fiction,

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literary theory, and political philosophy: a shift from talking about class and ideology to talking about culture and identity. The characters in novels such as Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama* and Don DeLillo's *Mao II*—and by extension their authors—writes Michaels, are not animated by "deep disagreements at the level of ideas" (173); in fact, they don't have any ideas. The interest these texts have in terrorists, for example, is not ideological but "ontological"—their concern is not with "doing the right thing" but with "the question of whether we are living our lives to the fullest" (176). For Michaels, indeed, politics itself has become ontologized. This shift has been paralleled by a new commitment to the "materiality" of the sign in literary studies, which Michaels presents as a movement away from interpretation and authorial intention, and toward a conception of plural meanings yoked to the plurality of subject positions encountering the text; this movement amounts in effect to the abolition of meaning and its replacement by a concept of experience. His thesis, developed largely in reaction to the set of postmodernist critical practices described above (although in fact sharing their basic assumptions), is that the "material turn" and the rejection of intentionality form an alliance that is essentially contradictory, for to emphasize experience is ultimately to negate the materiality of the text for the primacy of the subject.

Michaels here opposes the particularity of individual "needs and desires"—a phrase he lifts from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (49)—to the supposed universality and transcendentality of beliefs. The most provocative formulation of his argument is the following, characteristically invasive challenge to his reader: "If you think that differences in belief cannot be described as differences in identity, you must also think that texts mean what their authors intend" (10–11). Yet, like his understanding of experience and materiality, the distinction between beliefs and desires is an ontological one in Michaels (178)—which is to say that it is ahistorical, rooted in the present as a unitary category, fenced in on either side by the past and the future, and in the separation of subject (experience) and object (materiality). Beliefs, he writes, "always involve 'transcendental claims'" (179). In fact the opposite is true: beliefs are material entities; they do not involve transcendental claims until they are themselves on the verge of obsolescence—until, as Georg Lukács says, the world is "released from its paradoxical anchorage in a *beyond that is truly present*" (*Theory* 103; my italics). When they are constitutive of a society, beliefs are materially present to consciousness. Thus, even the

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so-called decline of belief or ideology and their replacement by culture or identity—what Michaels calls elsewhere the transformation from the political to the biopolitical (174)—this too, insofar as it exists at all in the generalized, historical sense that Michaels thinks it does, is a set of beliefs as materially, *sensuously* present to consciousness as the religious faith that animated societies in earlier periods.

"In ideological struggles," writes Michaels (indicating the Cold War period),

> victory is imagined as the triumph of one political and economic system over another; no new bodies are required. In ontological struggles, victory is the defeat of one body by another; in the ontological struggle not against some other body but against what *is* (hence against even one's own body), victory will be "change," the destruction of what is and its replacement by something "new." (173)

Yet Michaels's perception of this ontologization of ideology—the most ingenious version of which, according to Michaels, is the recent transformation of poverty from a class into a "way of being" in Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (Michaels 181)—is only possible on the basis of his own ontologization of the present. In his analysis a categorical—that is to say, epochal—difference separates, say, the (contemporary) concept of religion "as a kind of identity" from that of religious belief "as *belief*" (170). *Materiality, ideology,* and *belief,* however, are impoverished terms in Michaels's analysis, delimited conceptually and historically from consciousness, desire, and identity.

In contrast to all these thinkers, and following the work of Jean-François Lyotard, I will approach the postmodern not as signaling the end of the possibility of the event but as the occasion *of* the event. This perspective requires a suspension of the spatialized relation to time as broken up into unitary epochs and transitions; an interruption of the idea of the postmodern as a generic or typological category that is applicable to particular texts and authors; a rejection of the diagnostic and interpretive critical model for a kind of reading that is bound tightly to its own historical moment; and a resumption of attention to the ways in which the work is engaged with the question of its possibility.

According to Lyotard, the defining quality of the postmodern work is that it is undertaken in the absence of rules and "in order to formulate

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the rules of what *will have been done*. Hence the fact that work and text have the characters of an *event* . . ." ("Answering" 81; Lyotard's italics). Lyotard is concerned less with anatomizing the features of a particular artistic form or period than with the idea of the work as forged on the relation between possibility and actuality—or, as he formulates it in "Answering the Question," between the faculty of conceiving and the faculty of presenting—the radical disjunction of which, for Lyotard, defines the modern. Read alongside Jameson, Harvey, Michaels, et al., the most striking characteristic of Lyotard's formulation, and of the essay as a whole, is the absence of any constative statements that relate to the present. For Lyotard, there is no state of the world as such: the present is not an operative category in his work, and his book *The Postmodern Condition* is not a theorization of the contemporary. Indeed, the "slackening" (*relâchement*) that Lyotard observes to be part of the "color of the times" (71) is not a quality of the postmodern, but of its detraction—a reified and periodizing thinking that diagnoses a present constituted by crisis, impossibility, and a general sense of the unprecedented. The implication of Lyotard's phrase "the rules of *what will have been done,*" and of his conception of the postmodern work as an "event" irreducible to any moment in time—irreducible, that is to say, to any single historicization—is that the present does not have any substantial actuality except in retrospect; except, that is to say, in imagination.

In this essay, the work of Paul Auster—a figure who "by common reckoning," Peter Brooker has written, occupies the position of "pure postmodernist" (148) in contrast to the social realism of, say, Richard Price—will be read not as a more or less adequate treatment of postmodern themes and techniques; nor as evidence of a decline, in works of literature, from realist representation into self-conscious awareness of its impossibility; nor, *pace* Walter Benn Michaels, as a lapse from a world organized ideologically to one organized ontologically; but rather in terms of its positive material qualities: as a body of work that, precisely in its most cerebral and reflective aspects, is far more than a somber meditation on a world from which it is constitutively removed. Auster's work is engaged, rather, with its own possibility. His fictional works appear to stage the impossibility of the novel and the failure of the literary as such—and yet, I shall argue, it is the idée fixe of postmodernity that has taught us to limit his texts in this way. Auster materializes a struggle with possibility itself: the struggle to produce in a situation where the rules of produc-

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tion are not given. The materiality of his work, then, has nothing to do with what Michaels dismissively refers to as "the space between the words and letters, the quality of the paper, and so forth" (5) and everything to do with the event of the work's production and reception: the sensuous dynamic of possibility, impossibility, and actuality that is inseparable from consciousness of the work as such. Furthermore, this dynamic is manifest, sensuously present in Auster's work, as a truth worthy of belief in all its immediacy.

Lukács, theorist of the postmodern

For Lyotard, the question "and what now?" is not one that succeeds the postmodern but is precisely the question *of* it: "This is the misery [of] the painter [faced] with a plastic surface, of the musician with the acoustic surface, the misery the thinker faces with a desert of thought, and so on" ("Sublime" 454). The postmodern is for Lyotard a precondition of the modern, not a symptom of its exhaustion. The postmodern, he says, is what takes place not only in violation of aesthetic criteria but in the absence of them: it is "that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself" ("Answering" 81). Its situation is one of a complete disjunction between what we are able to conceive and our means of presentation:

> We have the Idea of the world (the totality of what is), but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it. We have the idea of the simple (that which cannot be broken down, decomposed), but we cannot illustrate it with a sensible object which would be a "case" of it. We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to "make visible" this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. ("Answering" 78)

What Lyotard describes as the situation of the postmodern artist and writer is remarkably similar to the "historico-philosophical" reality of the novel as described by Lukács in *The Theory of the Novel*. For Lukács, the novel appears at a point when form and content—Lyotard's faculties of presenting and conceiving—are split apart, a condition he characterizes with the phrase "the epoch of absolute sinfulness" (152). The novel, he says, "is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no

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longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality" (56). *The Theory of the Novel,* written in the years prior to the outbreak of the First World War, has the reputation of a text overwhelmed by the sense of contemporaneity. However, this is largely due to Lukács's own afterword on the book, written much later, in 1962, in which he condemned the book—and the phrase "absolute sinfulness" in particular—for what he called its "ethically-tinged pessimism vis-à-vis the present" (18). The afterword was published as a preface to the 1968 German edition and the subsequent English translation in 1971, and it is the only place in the book where there is any historical specificity at all.

The book was written, says Lukács in 1962, in a mood of "permanent despair over the state of the world" (12). The First World War had just broken out—the first war involving every major world power—and was accompanied by a sudden escalation in popular nationalist sentiment, which cast the European left into a state of crisis. Intellectuals, says Lukács, were caught between horror at the war itself and horror at the only available solution to the war: Western intervention. This is the situation which—now distancing himself from the phrase—he called in 1915 "absolute sinfulness": "absolute" since there is no acceptable solution that might be articulated in positive terms, "sinfulness" because all talk of innocence or honesty or redemption is rendered objectively futile and deluded. The world had proven to be so completely false, according to Lukács, that any available solution was discredited simply by the fact that it was speakable within it. Insofar as a solution might exist, it may only be articulated by what is *not* said, or rather in the incommensurability between what needs to be said and what it is possible to say.

In the body of the book, by contrast, there are almost no historical references at all, and certainly no referential specificity to the phrase "the epoch of absolute sinfulness." What the later Lukács casts as the real historical impasse behind his own early work is presented in the work itself as an aporia at the heart of the novel form as such. In the novel, he says in *The Theory of the Novel,* aesthetics is permanently separated from ethics—which is not to say that ethics is absent from the novel, but that the novel's ethical substance is tied inseparably to content. Ethical communication is limited to the pontification of its characters, or the commentary of its narrators. The novel gives form to the ethical dimension, but only

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by separating itself from what Lukács calls "the immanent meaning of the objective world" (84). Form and content, then, become severed from each other in the novel: it is this condition of separation, rather than any particular moral deficit or sudden historical break, that in 1915 Lukács signifies with the term "absolute sinfulness."

"Absolute sinfulness" (*vollendeten Sündhaftigkeit*) is a quotation from Fichte's *Die Grundzüge Des Gegenwärtigen Zeitalters,* a series of lectures delivered in Berlin in 1804–05, over 100 years before Lukács was writing, and translated into English as "The Characteristics of the Present Age."[1] From the perspective of his own 1962 preface, then, Lukács, in 1915, is wrenching out of context a phrase originally used to designate the post-Enlightenment period and reapplying it to his own traumatic present. What the later Lukács is criticizing in his younger self, in other words, is a tendency to ontologize and transcendentalize the present—as in the assertion, underpinning the work, that "there is no longer any spontaneous totality of being" (17–18). Yet Lukács's retrospective self-critique arguably participates in that ontologization even as it deplores it. His afterword inserts the text into a traumatic present caught between nostalgia and utopianism and offloads a "naivety" and an "abstractionism" on it that, he says, "we have every right to smile at" (20). However, it is far from clear that the paralysing historical sense that the older Lukács attributes to the younger is essential to the overall schema put forward in *The Theory of the Novel,* or even that it is substantially present in the thesis at all.

I will attempt a mediation of the temporal framework of *The Theory of the Novel* in order to reorient the text away from its spatiotemporal nostalgia for premodern literary forms—remnants of a time when (in the famous opening paragraphs of Lukács's work) "everything . . . is new and yet familiar"; when "each action of the soul becomes meaningful and rounded in [the] duality [of world and self]: complete in meaning—in *sense*—and complete for the senses . . ." (29). The nostalgic element in Lukács's text, I shall argue, is a purely speculative category organizing the "historico-philosophical" dimension of his argument. By suspending its periodizing aspects, it may yet be harnessed in the service of a potential unity of material and spiritual, residing not in any lost past or dreamed-of future but precisely in *the realm of possibility*—that is to say, in the post-modern novel.

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Timothy Bewes

Absolute sinfulness in Paul Auster

To read Paul Auster as a postmodern writer in Lyotard's sense is to read him as an author condemned to the historical and metaphysical condition that, for Lukács, defines the novel as such. The image of a world of "absolute sinfulness" recurs throughout his writing—the moment when night begins "to fall on the world forever," as *Mr. Vertigo* (1994) has it (3); when immanence, the epic unity of sensory and intellectual experience, gives way to the world of the novel; when his writer protagonists become reconciled or resigned to the novel form—and the calamity is frequently dated to the year 1927, the strange consistency serving, it seems, to undermine any suggestion of a real, epistemic (temporal-spatial) rupture. Auster's protagonists are always blocked or aspiring authors, and the novel form is almost always an absent presence—an entity present only as an absence—within the text. *Mr. Vertigo,* for example, opens in 1927, the year in which the protagonist, a levitating performance artist, witnesses the horrific murder of two of his friends by the Ku Klux Klan, the shame of which signals the end of his performances and precipitates the events that will culminate in the writing of the book we are reading.

The Book of Illusions (2002) is, among other things, the story of a silent movie actor, Hector Mann, who disappears in 1929 soon after disposing of the body of his pregnant lover, who has been killed by his fiancée. As a fugitive, Hector initially makes a living as a sex performer, a development that marks the moment when "his world [splits] in two," after which point "his mind and body were no longer talking to each other" (184). This contrasts with his silent film work, which the narrator of the book, a recently bereaved and blocked writer named David Zimmer, describes as "at once engaged in the world and observing it from a great distance" (35).

David is undertaking a translation of Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* during the period narrated by the book and—it turns out—is himself writing a memoir that will only become available after his death: this, of course, is the book we are reading. The narrative concerns David's encounter with Hector Mann and the films he has continued to make in secret on a ranch in New Mexico, films that turn out to be much more like novels than films, since they rely heavily on voice-over narration and are caught up, for Hector, in an ethical economy of personal expiation and atonement. For Hector, however, absolution will never be

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possible (278); cinema, far from lifting him out of "absolute sinfulness," is rather the context in which that novelistic condition is experienced. Auster's conception of the transition from silent to sound cinema—a shift that is usually dated, incidentally, to 1927, with the release of *The Jazz Singer*—thus repeats Lukács's conception of the transition from the world of the epic to that of the novel. Silent cinema, says David Zimmer, is

> a dead art, a wholly defunct genre that would never be practiced again. And yet . . . none of it could possibly grow old. It was thought translated into action, human will expressing itself through the human body, and therefore it was for all time. (15)

Nevertheless, to create works without any thought of a living audience is presented in the book as a way of paying due penance—for Chateaubriand, who imagines his narrative posthumously "accompanied by those voices which have something sacred about them because they come from the sepulchre" (67); for Hector, who makes films only on the condition that they will be destroyed after his death (207–08); and for David himself, for whose narrative about Hector Mann and his films there is so little surviving evidence, and which concludes in thoughts of such corrupting "power and ugliness," that he too resolves not to publish it until after his own death (316, 318).

Oracle Night (2003) is narrated by Sidney Orr, another blocked writer. On purchasing a blue notebook at a stationery store, Sidney is finally able to begin a new work of fiction, a story about a disenchanted publisher named Nick Bowen, who one day receives the manuscript of an unpublished novel titled "Oracle Night," written—in 1927—by a woman long dead, by the name of Sylvia Maxwell. The manuscript—a novel within a novel (within a novel)—impresses Nick by its demands for "total surrender in order to be read, an unremitting attentiveness of both body and mind" (66). Its central character is a First World War veteran named Lemuel Flagg, who suffers seizures during which he is able to see the future, the terrible knowledge of which causes him to commit suicide. Another surrogate author-figure in Sidney's novel is a former taxi-driver named Ed Victory, whom Nick encounters when, inspired by a parable related in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon,* he abandons his life in New York and, on a whim, flies to Kansas. Ed was a member of the allied liberating forces in Europe at the end of the Second World War, and he characterizes his experience on entering Dachau in April 1945 to Nick Bowen as fol-

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lows: "That was the end of mankind. . . . God turned his eyes away from us and left the world forever" (92). After the war, Ed began a project he calls "The Historical Preservation Bureau"—a collection of telephone directories from around the world, kept in an underground lockup in Kansas City—as a way of dealing with the enormity of the horror at Dachau. In *Oracle Night* too, then, the events take place in a world of "absolute sinfulness," with the unbearable knowledge of what man is capable of and an awareness of the impossibility of rendering that horror in literature. Soon after we hear the fictional Ed's story—a day after Sidney *writes* the story—Sidney himself comes across a newspaper story about a prostitute giving birth over a toilet, discarding the baby and then returning to her client, which causes him to experience the same extreme sensations: "*This is the worst story I have ever read.* . . . I understood that I was reading a story about the end of mankind, that that room in the Bronx was the precise spot on earth where human life had lost its meaning" (115). The episode is an objective correlative, perhaps, of Sidney's own difficulties in finishing his novel; after reading the Bronx story, he is unable to make any more progress, and the story is abandoned, with his character Nick trapped in the underground Bureau in Kansas City, unable to get out.

Oracle Night

I have written elsewhere of the envy that Auster's novels entertain for more sensuous and immediate forms of aesthetic experience: music, painting, levitation, even (in *Timbuktu*) canine sense-perception ("Novel as an Absence"). In *The Book of Illusions* and *Oracle Night,* the most consistent counterpart to the novel is cinema, although the attitude toward it in both books is deeply ambivalent. In *Oracle Night,* for example, Sidney is invited to submit a treatment for a film adaptation of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*—a purely commercial enterprise, it is made clear. Wells's idea of "time travel," as Sidney is aware, is predicated on a spatialized conception of time, and as such is incoherent, for

> once people from the future began to influence events in the past and people from the past began to influence events in the future, the nature of time would change. Instead of being a continuous progression of discrete moments inching forward in one direction only, it would crumble into a vast, synchronistic blur. (122)

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Yet, for the sake of the $50,000 on offer, Sidney outlines a scenario in which the inventor of the time machine, in the year 1895, travels forward in time to 1963 and meets a girl from the twenty-second century who, thanks to the further technological development of his invention, has been able to travel back in time. The two fall in love and decide to stay together, beginning in the year 1963; they bury their time machines in a meadow, thereby precluding the very technological development that made their meeting possible. Auster's conceit is a gesture, at least, toward a nonspatial temporality; however, the proposal is rejected by the Hollywood production company as "too cerebral" (187), a judgment that is apparently consistent with the novel's final affirmation of literature over cinema. At the end of the book, Sidney's friend and fellow author John Trause tells him in a posthumous letter—a voice from the sepulchre—"I don't want you to have to waste your time fretting about movies. Stick with books. That's where your future is . . ." (229). On reading the note, Sidney hears John's

> living voice talking from the other side of death, from the other side of nowhere. . . . I saw John's ashes streaming out of the urn in the park that morning. . . . I had my face in my hands and was sobbing my guts out. . . . Even as the tears poured out of me I was happy, happier to be alive than I had ever been before. It was a happiness beyond consolation, beyond misery, beyond all the ugliness and beauty of the world. (242–43)

Writing is here imagined as attaining everything that Auster longs for for it: presence, immediacy, sensation, the simultaneity of past, present, and future. However, behind that aspiration on behalf of writing stands cinema—in particular, that idea of cinema as "human will expressing itself through the human body" put forward in *The Book of Illusions:* a form constructed from "a syntax of the eye, a grammar of pure kinesis" (15). Auster's works, it seems, are defined by a wish that the novel might achieve the "immediacy" that other, supposedly more sensuous forms enjoy so effortlessly. Early on in *Oracle Night,* the effect of a children's 3-D picture viewer is described as follows: "Everyone in them looked alive, brimming with energy, present in the moment, a part of some eternal now that had gone on perpetuating itself for close to thirty years" (37–38). Yet what becomes clear in that final paragraph of *Oracle Night* is that Auster does not believe in the case he is trying to make. In its ambivalent

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relation to cinema, Auster's work shows itself to be driven by the lure of sensuous immediacy, and yet in that very fixation, finds itself rearticulating the spatiotemporal nostalgia of the novel form as such—condemning itself to what is, according to Lukács, the ethical division between form and content in the novel. After all, *Oracle Night* is itself a piece of writing; if the level of immediacy that Auster yearns for in writing were possible, why argue the case for it?

A more convincing statement of belief in *Oracle Night* is found a few pages earlier, when Sidney reflects on the recent travails that have beset him—a catalogue of the events we have been reading about, foremost among which is the failure of his Nick Bowen novel. Here, arguably, Auster's work looks directly and less anxiously at the "historico-philosophical" conditions of literary production emblematized by the novel form and produces something closer to a materialization of the consciousness of the work, organized around the struggle with possibility:

> I tried to write a story and came to an impasse. I tried to sell an idea for a film and was rejected. . . . I was a lost man, an ill man, a man struggling to regain his footing, but underneath all the missteps and follies I committed that week, *I knew something I wasn't aware of knowing.* At certain moments during those days, I felt as if my body had become transparent, a porous membrane through which all the invisible forces of the world could pass—a nexus of airborne electrical charges transmitted by the thoughts and feelings of others. I suspect that condition was what led to the birth of Lemuel Flagg, the blind hero of *Oracle Night,* a man so sensitive to the vibrations around him that he knew what was going to happen before the events themselves took place. I didn't know, but every thought that entered my head was pointing me in that direction. Stillborn babies, concentration camp atrocities, presidential assassinations, disappearing spouses, impossible journeys back and forth through time. The future was already inside me, and I was preparing myself for the disasters that were about to come. (222–23, my italics)

Knowing things without knowing that we know them: this is the condition that Lukács characterizes as that of the epic, and it denotes a world in which "being and destiny [that is to say, actuality and possibility], adventure and accomplishment, life and essence are . . . identical concepts" (30). The

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greatest historical example, according to Lukács, is the works of Homer, who found the answer to the question of how life can become essence "before the progress of the human mind through history had allowed the question to be asked" (30). "The Greek knew only answers but no questions, only solutions (even if enigmatic ones) but no riddles, only forms but no chaos" (31).

The obvious thing to say about the long passage from Auster is that by writing it he confirms its untruth. To *know* that one knows something that one is not aware of knowing—to *long* to know without being aware of knowing—defeats the aspiration toward immanence, lifting the entire structure into the ethical domain of the "should be"—"in whose desperate intensity the essence seeks refuge," writes Lukács, "because it has become an outlaw on earth" (*Theory* 48). And yet—as Lukács says of the nostalgic relation to the world of the epic—"what [we] seek to escape from when [we] turn to the Greeks constitutes [our] own depth and greatness" (31). Reading Auster with Lukács enables us to affirm even that which prohibits its affirmation, and to deny even that which forces us to make the denial: the permanent estrangement of the world and the "essence." The final catastrophe of Nick Bowen, trapped irrevocably in an underground lockup with his creator unable to devise a credible means of escape—this complete failure of form is, perhaps, the moment of Auster's greatest success, or rather the means by which the duality of aesthetic success and failure is displaced by a commitment, in principle, to the reconciliation of form and content, sensation and intellection, mind and body. With Nick's indefinite incarceration underground, the trajectory on which he has been embarked since the beginning—the abandonment of a life of convention and predictability in New York in order to learn to "accept what's happening, accept it and actively embrace it" (95)—is brought to a logical extreme. The trajectory is that of Auster himself: away from the ethos of the novel and toward what Lukács calls "the immanent meaning of the objective world." Impasse is transformed from a (spatio-temporal) historical condition into a condition of possibility itself.

Lukács's aesthetics of cinema

For Lukács, the novel by definition stands outside its own ethical pronouncements; in the novel we know things, and we know that we know them. Knowledge and experience are commensurable, but only at the cost

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of the sensuous intimacy of that knowledge. In the world of the novel, belief has become (to use Walter Benn Michaels's word) "transcendental." Its "normative mentality" is "irony" because the novel is ethically reflective; ethics can only take the form of an "ought," a "should be" that is always "profoundly inartistic" (Lukács, *Theory* 85). Such ethical pontification, organized around the interiority of the individual, and the expression of his or her "transcendental homelessness," is harnessed to the word and differentiated from "art," which, whether literary or visual, has a sensuous actuality. Thus Dostoevsky—whose works depict the world in an immediate form "remote from any struggle against what actually exists" (Lukács, *Theory* 152)—did not, according to Lukács, write novels—unlike, say, Tolstoy, whose "polemical" and "nostalgic" works exemplify the formal incommensurability, the "irony" that Lukács finds in the novel.

In his 1962 preface, Lukács states that it wasn't until 1917 that he found an answer to the "problems" that had seemed to him, when he was writing *The Theory of the Novel*, "insoluble" (12); he is referring, of course, to his conversion to Bolshevism. Yet, even to look for a solution, to conceive of the situation of the novel in terms of problems requiring a solution, is an approach that emerges out of a novelistic ethic and—it hardly needs saying—a spatialized temporality. "An epic hero constructed out of what 'should be,'" writes Lukács in 1915, "will always be but a shadow of the living epic man of historical reality, *his shadow but never his original image,* and his given world of experience and adventure can only be a watered down copy of reality, never its core and essence" (*Theory* 48; my italics). It is difficult, reading this sentence, not to think of cinema as its contraposition, particularly in its theorization by André Bazin, for example, who, in "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," writes: "The photographic image is the object itself, the object *freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it*" (14; my italics). Bazin continues:

> No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model."

Lukács himself remained faithful to the historical-revolutionary solution he discovered in 1917 for the rest of his life. However, several years before he wrote *The Theory of the Novel,* he entertained a quite different, "aesthetic" solution, one that predates the dawning "historical" conscious-

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ness apparent in that work and, furthermore, implies a conception of cinematic time that is quite at odds with the spatiotemporal ethos of the novel. In the little-known essay "Thoughts Toward an Aesthetic of the Cinema," published in 1913, Lukács outlines a precocious philosophy of cinematic form as a vehicle of the kind of unbroken, sensuous intimacy between soul and world that, in *The Theory of the Novel,* he would later ascribe to the epic.[2] In this earlier essay, he begins by comparing cinema to theater in terms of the very different inflections that each gives to the notion of presence and the present. He writes that "the lack of [a] 'present' is the primary characteristic of the cinema," as opposed to the theater, in which the stage is an "absolute present" ("Thoughts" 13–14). This lack of a present "is no defect of the 'cinema,'" writes Lukács. "This is its limit, its *principium stilisationis.*" And he goes on to outline something like an idea of the immanence of cinema:

> Not only in their technique, but also in their effect, cinematic images, equal in their essence to nature, are no less organic and alive than [. . .] images of the stage. Only they maintain a life of a completely different kind. In a word, they become fantastic. This fantastical element is not a contrast to living life, however, it is only a new aspect of the same: a life without the present, a life without fate, without reasons, without motives, a life without measure or order, without essence or value, a life without soul, of pure surface, a life with which the innermost of our soul does not want to coincide; nor can it. Even when the soul still—and often—longs for this life, this longing is for a foreign abyss, for something far off and internally distant. The world of the "cinema" is thus a world without background or perspective, without any difference in weight or quality, as only the present gives things fate and weight, light and lightness. (14)

For Lukács here, cinema has none of the deathly "irony" of the novel; the ethical quality of cinema is precisely the absence of ethics as such; or rather, the inseparability of the ethical from the real, the inseparability of possibility from actuality. (The same idea is expressed in Jean Luc Godard's famous line about the cinema, an intertitle in his film *Le Vent d'est:* "Ce n'est pas une image juste, c'est juste une image.") "'Everything is possible.'" writes Lukács further:

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> this is the worldview of the "cinema," and because it technically expressed absolute reality [. . .] in every individual moment, *the validity of possibility is cancelled out as a category opposed to reality.* The two categories become equal. They assume one identity. "Everything is true and real, is equally true and equally real." This is the teaching of the shot sequencing of the "cinema."
> (15; my italics)

Writing, then, over 30 years before André Bazin wrote "Ontologie de l'image photographique (1945), 50 years before Michelangelo Antonioni made *L'eclisse* (1962), and 70 years before Gilles Deleuze published *L'image-mouvement* (1983), Lukács puts forward a theory of the cinema as having a sensuous, immediate relation to temporality itself. The cinema, for Lukács in 1913, is everything that the novel is not. In fact, cinema is closer to how Lukács came to see the epic: as having none of the formal, historical, and ethical melancholy associated, for Lukács, with the novel.

Yet the significance of Lukács's essay on cinema is less to the cinema as such, perhaps, than to the mentality of the novel. After all, the essay itself is a distinctly ethical—that is to say, novelistic—reflection; according to its own prescriptions, the cinema could not help but regard its earnest avowals ironically. Lukács's essay should be read, then, as an index of the mentality that is preoccupied with the novel—the anxiety that forms and is formed by the novel, the mentality of the writer and theorist of fiction. Lukács's essay is especially relevant in the contemporary context, where the cinema so often appears as a solution to the dilemmas and problematics of fiction itself: besides the recent works by Paul Auster that I have been discussing, we might think of texts such as Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses,* E. L. Doctorow's *City of God,* Dennis Cooper's *Period,* or W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz,* each of which betrays an attraction to cinema as the model for a fictional practice that works to introduce something like Lukács's imagined "renewed epic"—a form "bound to the historical moment" in such a way that the world "is drawn . . . simply as a seen reality" (*Theory* 152). The term "seen" (*geschaute*) is here a distraction from the real significance of this passage. Cinema is important for these writers not strictly as a visual medium but as a sensuous one, in which space and, particularly, time, are materially present. In cinema, time, for Lukács as for Deleuze and Bazin, is experienced outside the linear, spatialized, and imperialist conception of it—the conception reproduced in all periodizing accounts of the postmodern.

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Certainly Auster's *The Book of Illusions,* at least at the beginning, looks longingly toward cinema as a symbol of everything that writing is unable to achieve. Cinema, in other words, is inserted into *The Book of Illusions* as a potential solution to the ethical-aesthetic incommensurability that defines the novel as such. However, this conception of cinematic possibility is so novelistic, so deeply implicated in an economy—both ethical and temporal—of expiation and redemption, that it is unable to release Auster's work from the structural "irony" to which Lukács condemns the novel as such; in fact, cinema in Auster functions to bind his work even more firmly to the novel. Nevertheless, the encounter staged between cinema and the novel in Lukács's early writings, as well as in Auster's most recent fiction, enables us to read even that failure "cinematically," following a logic of the postmodern "event," in Lyotard's sense, in which the question of success or failure is displaced by that of possibility itself.

The Book of Illusions

As I have already noted, author figures proliferate in Auster's works, and in *The Book of Illusions* as much as any. Besides David Zimmer and Hector Mann, whose project of cinematic atonement begins in 1939 ("just after the Germans invaded Poland" [212]), another author surrogate appears as the central character of one of Hector's films, *The Inner Life of Martin Frost,* made in 1946.

The Inner Life of Martin Frost is the only film that David has time to watch after being summoned to the ranch—before Hector dies and the films are destroyed—and the only one, therefore, that he describes in detail. The film was shot at the ranch, and as David begins to watch, he finds it impossible to separate the fictional images from the reality of their familiar setting. "I was supposed to read them as shadows, but my mind was slow to make the adjustment. Again and again, I saw them as they were, not as they were meant to be" (243). Martin Frost, the protagonist of the film, is a novelist who arrives to stay at "Hector and Frieda's ranch" while they are on vacation; thus the idea, which Bazin and Lukács share, of cinema's disintegration of the distinction between original and reproduction, possibility and actuality, art and life—that is to say, cinema's challenge to ontology itself—is played with explicitly in Hector's film, and yet, perhaps, only played with. For Deleuze, the same quality is what enables cinema to materialize time in a "crystalline" (78) form, meaning

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that the "indivisible unity of an actual image and 'its' virtual image"—the virtuality of the actual—becomes manifest as such. In such moments, time is "liberated" from movement—from narrative—and becomes perceivable in itself: "a little time in the pure state" (169).

Almost immediately on arriving, despite his intention to "do nothing, to live the life of a stone" (245), Martin Frost begins work on a new story inspired by the desert landscape around him. On awakening his first morning, he finds the mysterious Claire, a beautiful philosophy student, asleep in his bed; after the initial shock they quickly fall in love. Passages from Claire's reading of Berkeley and Kant, on sense perception and the impossibility of objective knowledge, are worked into the narrative in Claire's delivery (from Kant, for example: "if we drop our subject or the subjective form of our senses, all qualities, all relations of objects in space and time, nay space and time themselves, would vanish"—*Book of Illusions* 264; see Kant 34). The scenario is not dissimilar to a subplot of a film Auster himself scripted, *Smoke* (1995), in which a writer named Paul Benjamin (a name Auster once took as a nom de plume to publish a detective novel)[3] accepts an apparently homeless boy as a guest in his Brooklyn apartment after the boy saves his life. Both films—the real and the fictional—include relatively conventional uses of montage, in which cinematographic shots of the writer banging away on a typewriter (Martin Frost and Paul Benjamin respectively) are juxtaposed with actions which may or may not be anything more than a scenario being played out in the writer's head and on his page.

As in *Smoke,* the uncertainty is quickly settled by the *Martin Frost* narrative, although in the opposite direction to *Smoke,* where the resolution is on the side of the actual. By confirming the mise-en-scène of *The Inner Life of Martin Frost* as "the inside of a man's head" (243), Auster dissolves the indiscernibility of actual and virtual in cinema into a merely subjective ambiguity. In such a case, writes Deleuze, "the confusion of the real and the imaginary is a simple error of fact and does not affect their discernibility: the confusion is produced solely 'in someone's head'" (69). It is just this kind of "psychological" resolution that Lukács regards as typically novelistic: "The autonomous life of interiority" he writes, "is possible and necessary only when the distinctions between men have made an unbridgeable chasm; when the gods are silent and neither sacrifices nor the ecstatic gift of tongues can solve their riddle . . ." (66).

These conceptual relations of the novel are staged by Auster, of course,

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rather than simply reproduced—and the staging is most overt with the conclusion of *The Inner Life of Martin Frost*. By the time Martin finishes writing his story, Claire is dead, having succumbed to a fever that has been worsening correlatively with the progress Martin has been making on his work. Furthermore, Martin discovers that he is able to revive her, as if miraculously, by burning the pages of his story. This circumstance alludes to Hector's plan to destroy his own films after his death and is referred explicitly both to a passage in Luis Buñuel's autobiography *My Last Sigh* (110), where Buñuel considers burning the negative of his film *Un Chien andalou* on the Place du Tertre in Montmartre (284), and to Chateaubriand's ideal of withholding his *Mémoires* from publication (Hector owns copies of both works) (237–38). It also recalls a story recounted in *Smoke* by Paul Benjamin of Mikhail Bakhtin using up his manuscript on the bildungsroman for cigarette papers during the siege of Leningrad. This historical episode is explained by the Bakhtin scholar Michael Holquist as an index of the insignificance to Bakhtin of his own thoughts "once they had already been thought through" (xxv)—that is to say, of Bakhtin's uninterestedness in exploiting his thoughts once they had served their purpose. In all of these cases—Martin, Hector, Buñuel, Chateaubriand, Bakhtin—the valency of the posthumous gesture consists in an indifference to posterity and a commitment to the event, life—the intimacy between art and life—rather than to the documentation of the event, or art as such.

In cinema, however, the destruction of the work is unnecessary for the affirmation of life, for the simple reason that—as Lukács in 1913 was aware—cinema is not predicated on the notion of presence, of ontology, at all: "The essence of the 'cinema' is movement in itself, an eternal variability, the never-resting change of things" ("Thoughts" 15). The reality of cinema, writes Bazin in a similar vein, is that of "the world of which we are a part, the sensory continuum of which the film takes a spatial as well as temporal mold" ("Death" 144). The state of "indifference" that Auster's characters are in pursuit of (*Oracle Night* 60, *Book of Illusions* 245) is achieved by cinema as such; there is no need for heroic, egoistic gestures. "The world was full of holes," observes David early on in *The Book of Illusions* (after he has narrowly escaped shooting himself with a loaded gun),

> tiny apertures of meaninglessness, microscopic rifts that the mind could walk through, and once you were on the other side of one

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> of those holes, you were free of yourself, free of your life, free of your death, free of everything that belonged to you. (109)

Yet this is a lesson of cinema (or indeed, the epic)—not of the novel, where, for Lukács at least, immanence is always attenuated by the principle of individuality. "An empty immanence," he writes,

> which is anchored only in the writer's experience and not, at the same time, in his return to the home of all things, is merely the immanence of a surface that covers up the cracks but is incapable of retaining this immanence and must become a surface riddled with holes. (*Theory* 92)

In *Oracle Night,* Sidney reflects on the preparation of his Hollywood film script: "I didn't want there to be any holes in the story" (136). But for Deleuze, the power of cinema is precisely that of a "'dissociative force' which would introduce a 'figure of nothingness', a 'hole in appearances'" (167). Lukács's use of the same image to denote the contrary—the betrayal of immanence—exposes and corrects the "novelistic" ethos at work in his own passage as quoted above. Immanence, after all, can be neither "betrayed" nor "attenuated." As Lukács says a paragraph later, the "intuitive double vision" (93) of the novel makes it "the representative art-form of our age," the structural qualities of which "constitutively coincide with the world as it is today." Immanence is not a lost innocence but awaits us as a category of possibility to be wrought out of the simultaneity of past, present, and future.

End and continuity

Paul Auster, the most "postmodern" of contemporary authors, is revealed by Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel* to be also the most novelistic of writers. The preoccupations that drive his fiction are those of the novel as such; and yet those preoccupations are themselves formed, in part, by the appearance of cinema—as suggested by the fact that Lukács's essay on the aesthetics of cinema precedes his great work on the novel by two or three years. Even when dealing directly with cinema, as in *The Book of Illusions,* Auster does so as a novelist, looking to cinema with envy, as to a promise of redemption that will achieve the immanence of the epic—the category of possibility that his metaphysically, historically, and ethically

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traumatized writer protagonists have been consumed by ever since *City of Glass*. Read in the light of Lukács's early writing, Auster's fiction seems determined to play out the demise of fiction itself; yet this determination has its contrary structurally embedded in it.

The conjunction of two apparently incompatible diagnoses, Lyotard's mode of the postmodern as *futur-anterior* and Lukács's concept of "absolute sinfulness," requires us to dispense with the historical thesis of *The Theory of the Novel*—the link between "absolute sinfulness" and a particular historico-philosophical moment—as well as the spatiohistorical thesis of the postmodern that we find in, for example, Jameson, Harvey, and Michaels: not only the idea of its contemporaneity but also the idea of its recent obsolescence. Both theses reiterate an ontology of the present emerging from an intense awareness of the present as such. As long as the novel situates itself in a derivative or imitative relation to cinema, looking enviously to cinema as a solution to its own formal disunity, it seems destined to repeat the traumatic and impossible ethical relation to the present that is consistently staged in Paul Auster's work. If there is a lesson in cinema for fiction, it is, in Deleuze's words, "to free [itself] from the model of truth which penetrates it" (150). Only when the literary text construes such a cinematic or epic temporality in the body of the writing itself—as it does, I would argue, in writers such as W. G. Sebald and Dennis Cooper—only then will it overcome that ontological relation to the present that Lukács calls "absolute sinfulness."

Notes

1. Fichte writes:

> The Present Age . . . stands in that Epoch . . . which I characterized as the Epoch of Liberation—directly from the external ruling Authority,—indirectly from the power of Reason as Instinct, and generally from Reason in any form; the Age of absolute indifference toward all truth, and of entire and unrestrained licentiousness:—the State of completed Sinfulness. (17)

For Fichte, significantly, this is not an endpoint but merely the third of five stages on the road from instinct to reason; and he goes on to qualify the "ontological" implications of the diagnosis: "I do not here include all men now living in our time, but only those who are truly products of the Age, and in whom it most completely reveals itself" (18).

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2. For details on the circumstances of the essay's publication, see Blankenship.

3. Auster's pseudonymous detective novel, *Squeeze Play,* is included as an appendix in his otherwise nonfiction collection *Hand to Mouth.*

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Training and Vision: Roth, DeLillo, Banks, Peck, and the Postmodern Aesthetics of Vocation

Sean McCann

> What is hastily called deconstruction *as such* is never a technical set of discursive procedures, still less a new hermeneutic method operating on archives or utterances in the shelter of a given and stable institution; it is also, and at the least, the taking of a position, in work itself, toward the politico-institutional structures that constitute and regulate our practice, our competencies, and our performances.
>
> —Jacques Derrida ("Mochlos" 22–23)

> What distinguishes thought is that it is something quite different from the set of representations that underlies a certain behavior; it is also something quite different from the domain of attitudes that can determine this behavior. . . . Thought is freedom in relation to what one does.
>
> —Michel Foucault (388)

> In my life I have had, in total, a couple of months of these completely wonderful days as a writer, and that is enough. . . . You know, it's a choice to be occupied with literature, like everything else is a choice.
>
> —Philip Roth (qtd. in Krasnick)

In his afterword to the 25th anniversary edition of *Portnoy's Complaint*, Philip Roth provides no commentary on his celebrated novel, taking the opportunity instead to craft an ingenious fable about the origins of his literary career. While the brief essay at first appears to offer a realistic ac-

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count of the trials of a poor young writer, discharged from the army and teaching freshman composition at the University of Chicago in 1956, it concludes with a gnomic leap into literary fancy. In the first mode, Roth describes himself as an ambitious young man who, determined to "manufacture a future" ("something more humanely exciting than a De Soto hardtop or a Westinghouse washer-dryer" [278]), discovers instead "just how little one has to do with calling the shots that determined the ways in which a life develops" (279). Confronted, as a veteran and as a grader of freshman papers, with the "counterpressure of the limitless Anti-You," the young Roth learns that "orderly expectations and a rational outlook are . . . a fantasy"—a discovery that coincides with the aspiring writer's realization that his fledgling efforts "were not dazzling, they were derivative" (282). And although he is determined by sheer dint of will to turn himself into a great artist ("I looked in the mirror above the bathroom sink and said aloud to my reflection, 'All you have to do is sit down and work!'"), the effort proves unsuccessful.

But then, in the second mode, Roth describes a miraculous antidote to that painful education. At a local cafeteria, "where about as many working people as university people were dinnertime regulars" (283), the young writer discovers a typewritten sheet of some nineteen unrelated sentences. For example:

> The first time I saw Brenda she asked me to hold her glass. Dear Gabe, The drugs help me bend my fingers around a pen. Not to be rich, not to be famous, not to be mighty, not even to be happy, but to be civilized—that was the dream of his life.

And so on. The young writer takes the paper to be "the work of a neighborhood avant-gardist" (284). But it is only after considering the document for some time, Roth writes, that the younger version of himself discovered "what surely would have been obvious at the outset to anyone less well trained—or perhaps less poorly trained—in the art of thinking than I was back then":

> I saw that these sentences, as written, had *nothing* to do with one another. I saw that if ever a unifying principle were to be discernible in the paragraph it would have to be imposed from without rather than unearthed from within.
>
> What I eventually discovered was that these were the first lines of the books that it had fallen to me to write.
>
> (288; Roth's emphasis)

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What the avant-gardist teaches the fiction writer, in short, is both the foolishness of the desire—a desire molded by the university as much as by the army—"to rationalize the irrational" (288) and the consequent opportunity to impose his individual purposes on "the workings of pure chance" (286). Teaching him to abandon a fatuous reliance on "one's own massive exertions," the piece of found poetry gives Roth instead not just the inspiration he needs to write dazzling fiction but the ability to fulfill the vocation that will make good on it. "Whether it was or wasn't my job" (289) to turn the avant-gardist's document into the occasion for a fiction writer's vocation, Roth concludes, looking back on his career in retrospect, "the job is now completed."

However unlikely it may be—and Roth stresses the sheer implausibility of his story by noting the historical impossibility of some aspects of his found document (like its references to a coronary catheterization and an EKG)—that fable could stand as a good summa of some of the main aesthetic principles of postmodern fiction. Some obvious features might be noted: the essay's metafictional gambit (an avowedly invented fable about the origins of a writer of fiction); the genealogy it traces to an implicitly more radical and less enduring historical avant-garde; and above all, the document's deeply antibureaucratic spirit and its appeal to chance as an escape from imprisoning routine. There are more subtle implications as well. In the reference to the young writer staring desperately into the mirror, Roth may be making a sly allusion to the optimistic final lines of "Goodbye, Columbus" (in which, after staring hard at the reflection of his face in a library window, Neil Klugman puts aside his infatuation with Brenda Patimkin and returns to work as a civil servant),[1] and in this manner referring to the way, beginning with *Portnoy's Complaint*, his writing moved away from the tightly constructed, high-minded stories of his early period and began notoriously to embrace a more freewheeling, scatological, and consistently self-referential style.

Indeed, the story told by Roth's afterword restages many similar arguments for the virtues of metafictional writing and similarly minded forms of literary theory that were prominent in the late 1960s and after, echoing as it does the unabashed yet often playful elitism common to those arguments. Casting himself as a fortunate escapee from the institution, for instance, Roth strikes a tone much like the one endorsed by Nabokov when he suggested that only those capable of seeing "the world as the potentiality of fiction" (2) could evade "the circulating library of public

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truths," or by John Barth when he claimed that, where the "commonalty" (75) inevitably loses its way among the prepackaged fictions of the world, only a "chosen remnant" of "virtuoso" artists had the capability "to master and make something new of them." To go a little farther afield, neither in its implicit literary theory nor in its tone is Roth's fantasia far distant from Jacques Derrida's suggestion (made in the same year as Barth's essay) that "an active interpretation" was permitted only to the bold thinker who "plays without security" ("Structure" 292).[2]

But to that frank elitism, Roth's later statement adds an explicit reference to a concern only implicitly raised by the work of his contemporaries. For in Roth's account, fiction is not only, as in Nabokov or Barth, a kind of play and outlandish invention but also a type of work and vocation. That concern stands out with particular clarity when one considers the relation of Roth's afterword to the novel it follows—but to which, fittingly, it has no obvious connection. *Portnoy's Complaint* tells the story of an ambitious young man of roughly Roth's age and background whose feverish fantasies and narratorial brio are not enough to get him beyond the constraints that have made him, and become instead mere symptoms of his condition. No escape route appears open to the miserable Alexander Portnoy. Neither the bureaucratic agencies of the state (such as the Mayor's Commission on Human Rights, by which he is employed) nor the opportunities provided by education, at which he has excelled, offer, as they appear to do throughout the stories of *Goodbye, Columbus,* alternatives to the impositions of family and culture or to the distorting effects of ethnic prejudice that threaten to make Portnoy "a walking zombie" (125). They merely continue those injuries by other means. What Roth's afterword does set up as an alternative, though, is the special vocation of the artist, a kind of career that in embracing chance over routine and invention over manufacturing appears to offer a type of work at odds with the uselessness of "massive exertion."

In short, Alexander Portnoy the character and narrator is forced to confront the mistaken nature of his belief that he can escape the limits of family and background through the very ambitions his upbringing has inculcated in him. But Roth the author dramatizes by contrast his own understanding that he can achieve a kind of professional autonomy not by repudiating the constraints that have made him but by making those constraints themselves the object of literary reflection. "I have never really tried, through my work or directly in my life, to sever all that binds

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me to the world I came out of" (*Reading* 9), Roth noted a few years after publishing *Portnoy*. "I am probably right now as devoted to my origins as I ever was. . . . But this has come about only after subjecting these ties and connections to considerable scrutiny." The implicit subject of his novel, in other words—one aptly foregrounded by his afterword—was not merely the comic imprisonment of Portnoy the civil servant but also the comparative emancipation of Roth the artist. The central concern of his work would henceforth lie in "my own imagination's system of constraints and habits of expression" (13).

To the degree that the alternative staged by *Portnoy's Complaint* is representative of the similar kinds of attitudes staked out by writers like Thomas Pynchon or John Barth or many of their contemporaries, it suggests that near the core of much postmodern fiction lies not only the revolt against formalism that many critics have noted but also a related concern about the autonomy and meaningfulness of creative work and a closely linked obsession with the difference between what, following Roth, we might call training and training. At the heart of this fiction, in other words, is an implicit drama, most directly framed by Roth, in which the good writer evades the indoctrination associated with the university and other bureaucratic institutions through an alternative yet closely allied form of education—so that, in Roth's telling phrase, the desire to be "less well trained" can be meaningfully redescribed as a desire to be "less poorly trained." The escape from indoctrination, in short, comes not by imagining a Rousseauian freedom from artificial constraint. Postmodern culture, as Linda Hutcheon points out, is distinguished above all by the knowledge that "it cannot escape implication in the . . . dominants of its time" (xiii). Nor does it seem possible in Roth's example to flee the university and take the working people of the cafeteria as the subject or inspiration for art.

Rather, Roth and the many writers who resemble him in this respect assume that the only route past bureaucratic confinement of various sorts is to embrace a level of sophistication and expertise that enables them to trump the restrictions that detain more pedestrian minds. The university, which epitomizes the worst features of a manufactured society, also becomes the indispensable launching pad for the effort to imagine one's way beyond its limits. And the metafictional gambit evident in Roth's afterword, as in the writing of countless postmodernist novelists (along with many of their academic contemporaries who became similarly intrigued

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by the power of "fictions" during the era), becomes not just an aesthetic technique but implicitly an ethical drama as well: the inventive artist versus the routine worker; the self-conscious writer versus the symptomatic buffoon; and, most fundamentally, skill versus bureaucracy.

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There are, of course, historical and sociological contexts that help to explain that widely shared drama. The high modernist literary formalism that Barth, Pynchon, and Roth all admired and then put aside was an aesthetic shaped in good part by the appeal of professional expertise and, by the postwar years, inextricably associated with the university. Its postmodern heirs were late and profoundly ambivalent inheritors of that situation—all educated at a moment when literary modernism seemed not a bold new form of artistic sophistication but an orthodox sign of cultural prestige.[3] Writers who came of age in this context had good reason to conceive the university as both a source of invaluable institutional support and a dangerous agency of routinization—an attitude perhaps encouraged all the more by the new capital flooding the publishing market during the 1960s and by the extraordinary expansion of higher education occurring at the same time. All the material conditions were in place, in other words, to support the conviction among young innovators in both literary publishing and academia that they represented a fundamental challenge to a cautious recent past from which they had also descended.[4]

But that immediate source of ambivalence might be broadened to include more widely shared concerns about the relation between skill, training, and bureaucratic institutions that blossomed among an increasingly educated and increasingly organized population in the United States during the 1960s. As many social critics noted at the time, the postwar decades in the United States witnessed a rapid expansion of the long-term trend toward the development of large-scale systems of interlocking social and economic organization, and that produced both grand expectations for the possibility of technological advance or social reform and frequent reports of anxiety about the decline of community and loss of personal autonomy.[5] In some obvious respects, those developments comprise a major theme of postmodern fiction: nefarious organization is everywhere, along with the capacity it gives us to draw dizzying connections among disparate kinds of experience; community and freedom are nowhere.

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But a more specific connection might be noted as well. Among the most important consequences of the rapid postwar expansion of education and bureaucratic organization may have been the way it revealed fundamental tensions among what earlier had seemed harmonious aspects of organized society's component parts. To put matters most simply, it was in the years following 1960 that the long-perceived affinity between bureaucratic organization and professional labor began to break down. The two phenomena traditionally had been assumed to walk hand in hand, and in the heady decades around the turn of the twentieth century, when the American economy saw the efflorescence of both professional and bureaucratic organizations, they often seemed virtually indistinguishable forces—each in pursuit of rationalization and efficiency, contributing to the growth of what Samuel Hays and a whole school of postwar historians would later call the "new organizational society." From this vantage point, the twentieth-century United States appeared to be dominated by what Burton Bledstein called a "culture of professionalism," a hegemonic social order built on the authority of "merit, competence, discipline, and control" (x).[6]

Ironically, however, it was just when historians like Hays and Bledstein were looking back to the early twentieth century to examine the rise of a new organizational society that the order they identified began to show signs of coming apart. Professionalism and bureaucracy, sociologist Richard Hall argued in 1968, were in fact "two related but often noncomplementary phenomena" (92), and his point was echoed by a number of his colleagues, who over the course of the sixties demonstrated the various ways that the two forms of organization seemed fated to conflict. If bureaucracies depended on certain structural principles—technical competence, hierarchical authority, procedural regularity, impersonality—those principles overlapped with the values of professionalism only in the emphasis on technical competence. So long as professionals remained committed to the other crucial aspects of their self-definition—particularly the image of their work as a calling—they would be likely to distrust bureaucratic organization. "The professional desire for autonomy" and "the bureaucratic desire for centralization" (Hobson 648) would almost inevitably come into conflict. Merit and competence, in sum, suddenly began to seem not only distinct from but potentially antagonistic to discipline and control.

Over the next several decades, the development of the American professions would bear that impression out, as rapid expansion led to increasing specialization and an increasing emphasis on expertise at the expense

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of professionalism's once prominent ethos of self-regulation and public service. The last three decades of the twentieth century, it could be said in this light, witnessed the emancipation of the expert from the restraints of the association.[7] But the antagonism identified by Richard Hall would be most directly and forcefully demonstrated during the sixties by the young activists of the New Left, and perhaps more generally by the discontent of the counterculture. "The greatest problem of our nation," Mario Savio claimed in 1964, was "depersonalized, unresponsive bureaucracy" (159). Among its most serious consequences, he added, was the fact that young people who had "come to the university . . . to question, to grow, to learn" were compelled to "suppress the most creative impulses that they have" (161). Tom Hayden likewise decried "the empty nature of vocational alternatives" (364) open to well-educated young people and praised a coming "insurgency" led by professional labor against bureaucratic institutions.[8] Within a few years, countercultural thinkers like Paul Goodman gave the notion a still more millenarian gloss. In the growing restiveness of "the new professional and technological class" (22) Goodman saw the promise not just of appealing political outcomes but of a whole spiritual transformation of the modern world—a "New Reformation." Thomas Pynchon echoed the point almost directly. In the unpredictable innovation of "technocrats" ("Is It OK" 41) and in their capacity to elude the control of a "permanent power establishment of admirals, generals and corporate CEO's," Pynchon saw the contemporary world's "best . . . hope of miracle."

None of this is to say, of course, that adherents of "the movement" in the sixties lacked ample cause—especially in institutionalized racism and the Vietnam war—for their dissatisfaction with "the system." But especially in its tendency to conceive injustice primarily as the absence of freedom, or meaning, or creativity (a tendency that led the movement to consider the problems of white middle-class students as coterminous with those of African Americans and Vietnamese anticolonialists), the New Left articulated the interests of a burgeoning meritocratic elite eager to make full use of what economist Gary Becker had recently dubbed its "human capital" and impatient with the lingering authority of an industrial model of economic and political relations. Something similar might be said of the contemporaneous flourishing of postmodernist writing. If the New Left, and more broadly the counterculture, can be conceived as the intellectual vanguard of a late twentieth-century transformation in the

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conditions and ethos of professional labor, postmodern writing was its literature. The new styles of fiction and literary and cultural theory that began to flourish in the later sixties shared with thinkers like Goodman and Hayden not just an emphasis on technical virtuosity and an anxiety about organization but also a nearly obsessive interest in the problem that former SDS president Paul Potter put at the very center of the era's political imagination: the question of how the highly educated youth of America's middle class might come to "inhabit their own minds" (45).

Even Potter's way of describing this problem highlights the distinctive ground that postmodern writing shared with the New Left's complaint against bureaucracy and regulation. By Potter's lights, the fundamental problem of American society was not inequality or exploitation but the pervasive effects of "social ideology" (235)—a form of discreet manipulation like "having the society plant something deep down inside of you." Thus, Potter claimed, "Those incredible things we call our minds do not really belong to us" (156). Postmodern fiction responded to this anxiety by literalizing the concern—telling stories of behavioral manipulation and retailing images (especially in Burroughs and Pynchon) of insidious, or sometimes benevolent, bodily invasion. The concern is evident not solely in the writing's oft-noted anxiety about the inevitability of ideological cooptation but also in its equally prevalent tendency to cast its characters as "passive, manipulated by a plot they perceive as already inscribed in their fictional universes" (Hite 706).[9]

Many others among the most prominent aspects of postmodernist writing can be traced as well to an underlying preoccupation with creative autonomy. As Roth suggests, whatever other purposes they might serve, the style's baroque metafictional devices act to demonstrate the author's evasion of the entanglements suffered by his or her characters—and, by some accounts, to impose a form of pedagogy, or perhaps therapy, on their readers that demands they rise to the same stringent level of self-awareness (Hite 701).[10] Better to give readers "models for a creative truth of 'construction,'" Ronald Sukenick explained in a statement virtually rote in the aesthetics of postmodernism, "rather than a passive truth of 'correspondence'" (236). Hayden White, though speaking about historical interpretation in particular and his desire to undermine the "disciplining of the imagination" (122) imposed by conventional historical writing, made almost precisely the same point. The ideological assumptions imposed by professional historians, he argued, "deprive history of the kind

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of meaninglessness that alone can goad living human beings to make their lives different for themselves and their children" (128). Derrida often suggested a roughly comparable view. Speaking of the way every text demands of its university-trained readers that they envision "the politics of an interpretive community" ("Mochlos" 21), Derrida hastened to add:

> the interpreter is never subjected passively to this injunction. . . . I do not fulfill a prior contract, I can also write, and prepare for signature, a new contract with an institution, between an institution and the dominant forces of society. And this operation . . . is the moment for every imaginable ruse and strategic ploy. (22)[11]

Not just in its representations, in other words, but more significantly in its address to its readers, postmodern writing frequently operates under the assumption that genuine autonomy is possible only for resolute and highly skilled individuals whose commitment to creative reinterpretation enables them to both draw on and evade the otherwise restrictive influence of professional norms.

Something similar is true of both postmodern writing's widely shared investment in the materiality of language, an investment evident in Roth's fantasia of the found document, and in the closely related allergy to naive realism commonplace throughout postmodern writing. The reasoning here is nicely suggested by the effort Potter made to conceive the problems he believed fundamental to the experience of young middle-class radicals in the sixties. Like many of the emerging cohort of poststructuralist theorists, Potter believed that submission to "social ideology" ran far deeper than particular policies and institutions; it was enforced, rather, as "the price extracted from us in exchange for the right to use words" (45). He assumed therefore that genuine autonomy would only become possible through a millennial transformation of the structures of communication. It would only be when "the thing we call language would no longer occur" that it would be possible to imagine legitimate self-possession: "If people made sounds our ears could discern, we would hear them as strange music" (205). The transformation he envisions—turning language into meaningless sound so as to enable a creative freedom that seems otherwise prevented—while far grander in aim, anticipates almost exactly Roth's story of reading a found document as an unintended collection of words, a "nothing." Both, as in William Gass's comparable description, treat language, "regardless of content and intention," as "little shapes and

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sounds to work with" (43), so that rather than being representational or intentional, utterances are enabled to become "the medium which is the writer's own."[12] For Gass as for Roth, in short, and in a different way for Potter and White, rendering language or experience meaningless allows it to be abstracted from its role in patterns of social communication so that it can become a possession of the writer alone and an occasion for his or her creative freedom.

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Countless versions of that literary theory were spun in both the fictional and theoretical inventions of postmodern writing that flourished in the two decades or so following the late sixties. But one especially revealing allegorical treatment can be found in Don DeLillo's first major novel, *The Names*. Much like Roth, DeLillo focuses especially on the condition of professional labor and, imagining it to be inseparable from profound ethical and political problems, contrives a solution to those problems through a theory of meaningless language whose signal effect comes in the spiritual and creative emancipation it appears to allow its adherents.

DeLillo's novel focuses on the trials and adventures of James Axton, a one-time technical writer now working as an analyst for what he believes is a firm selling risk insurance to corporations doing business in the third world. In the novel's concluding pages, however, Axton comes to understand that he has made what at first seems to him a terrible mistake: his employer is not a corporate insurance venture but a CIA front operation, and he has thus been an unwitting accomplice of America's imperial designs. "This mistake of mine, or whatever it was, this failure to concentrate" (317), Axton explains, "had the effect of justifying" every grievance and complaint articulated by his estranged wife, who had long expressed her uneasy intuitions about her husband's work and character. "It was that kind of error, unlimited in connection and extent, shining a second light on anything and everything." Just as Roth rescues his younger self from the fate of Portnoy, however, DeLillo quickly revaluates this apparent epiphany. Finally able to see himself from his wife's perspective, Axton comes to recognize himself less as a culpably ignorant man or a bad political actor than as the object of his wife's "compassion and remnant love." In one fell swoop, we shift from the realm of political accountability to the terrain of what the novel lyrically invokes as "pity" (330).

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The logic underlying that extraordinary transition hinges on a version of the symptomatic reading evident throughout postmodern thought. What makes Axton seem pitiable is in effect the same kind of intellectual operation that makes Portnoy laughable. Describing the latter's "mishaps," Roth explains that they are "wholly expressive of the individual" (*Reading* 7), so that each misstep appears not as a particular mistake but rather as a symptom of an underlying problem coextensive with his protagonist's identity. Likewise, because Axton's error is "unlimited in connection and extent," it speaks not of any particular interpretation or decision he has made but of something apparently more fundamental and less alterable: his character or identity. As an unwitting error, it also comes to seem an unintentional one, less a choice than an expression. This is the premise that makes Axton's error appear illuminating both of his life history and implicitly of his nationality (his wife's critical perspective being largely explained by the fact that she is a Canadian) and, by the same token, productive of absolution. Accidentally working for the CIA, Axton finally comes to understand, is not really a mistake; it's just who he is. As Roth says of Portnoy, "his most forcible oppressor by far is himself" (*Reading* 9).

Nor, as it happens, is this investment in mercy a minor feature of the text. For the symptomatic reading we see in this passage joins together and resolves the two major issues raised by DeLillo's novel. Of these, the problem of American imperialism is a secondary theme, riding beneath the questions raised by the novel's dominant narrative: the story of Axton's encounter with a mysterious sacrificial cult that chooses its victims by matching their initials to the locations where they are to be murdered. As it turns out, however, the problem of American imperialism, along with the question of Axton's character, becomes indistinguishable from the interest in the primal nature of names and language that is raised by the novel's major events. For what Axton learns in his encounter with the mysterious cult is a theory of language that undergirds his experience of mercy and, by the same token, manages to summarily dispatch the political embarrassment of American power.

That theory is a version of the one espoused by Gass, embroidered by Roth, and echoed by numerous of their contemporaries. As Axton eventually comes to understand, words in their essential nature (in the "deeper meanings" [313] that have been "lost through usage") are not intentional but purely physical and thus purely expressive objects. "Spat

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stones," Axton fittingly calls them (307), and DeLillo more clearly draws the message by explaining that in this view of language, "intended meaning is beside the point" (294). Stripped of their connection to "usage" and thus no longer conceived as a medium of communication, or of analysis or judgment, language appears instead solely as an extension of identity and, by the same token, as an occasion for mercy. Arriving in the novel's climactic passage on the Acropolis—a monument that opens the novel as a formidable image of oppressive rationality—Axton encounters not the "mathematics" and "optical exactitudes" (330) he first expected to find there but a Babel of noncommunicating voices, an expression of language in its material essence, which DeLillo describes approvingly as "glossolalia." Hearing language not as communication but as empty sound, "I found a cry for pity," Axton exults in the narrative's concluding paean, "this voice *we know as our own.*"

Why is there American imperialism, then? The answer, DeLillo suggests, in a mode that was becoming increasingly common during the period in which *The Names* was published, has less to do with political or even economic purposes than with the sort of unconscious mental habits that James Axton exemplifies. A consequence of what DeLillo calls "the grand ordering . . . vision" (269), the overseas projection of American power becomes an extension of the rational "exactitudes" Axton first perceives in the Parthenon and the analytical reasoning he engages in as an underwriter. Once we get past the mistaken investment in reason, however, to discover the redemptive, irrational truths Axton ultimately discovers on the Acropolis, that problem presumably will be solved—both because the main engine of imperialism will be destroyed and because, no longer tempted to impose an ordering vision on the disorderly corners of the globe, emancipated technocrats like Axton will be free to "concentrate," to devote themselves to who they are.[13]

Like *Portnoy's Complaint,* then, *The Names* might be described as a novel about a highly educated person's desire to inhabit his own mind, a desideratum that DeLillo suggests is inextricable from a nation's need to inhabit its own borders. Its central question is not, as DeLillo initially seems to suggest it will be, "Am I right or am I wrong?" The doctrine of intentionless language and the symptomatic reading that goes with it render that question empty. Rather, the central question becomes "Who am I?" and more fundamentally still: "Who owns my abilities, and how creative can I be in realizing on them?" Like the failings of the hero of

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Tim O'Brien's contemporaneous novel *Going After Cacciato,* the initial inadequacy of James Axton can be described best not as misjudgment, say, or bad faith, but as the particular inadequacy of the unaccomplished creative professional—"a failure of imagination" (O'Brien 313). As with the young Roth, it is only as Axton emancipates himself from the constraints of rationality and ordinary communication that he begins to approach intellectual autonomy and vocational autonomy as well—and that his work (the work that gives us the novel we read) begins more closely to resemble the labors performed by his estranged wife, a woman who engages in archaelogical digs that, utterly lacking in either economic or scholarly purpose, become purely spiritual and aesthetic acts. The whole direction of the novel, in short, is to move not just from judgment to pity but also from routine labor to imaginative expansion, and from a condition where it is impossible to know the management and ends of one's labor toward a condition where a voice may appear, to the same extent it says nothing, to be "our own." Meaningless language, along with the independent craftsmanship from which it seems inseparable, becomes the professional's recipe for personal freedom. In the concluding passages of his narrative, Axton fittingly envisions "a return to the freelance life" (318).[14]

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Such anyway is what I take to be the case made by Russell Banks's early novel, *The Book of Jamaica*. The tale of an American writer who undergoes a transformative journey in Jamaica during the height of the intense political conflicts that developed during Michael Manley's prime ministership, *The Book of Jamaica* (1980) is in many ways comparable to *The Names*. Banks's novel, like DeLillo's and O'Brien's, is plainly inspired by the doubts raised by anticolonial and anticapitalist challenges to American global dominance. Like *The Names,* it dramatizes those doubts via the story of an American's sojourn into a dark land of violence and magic (an analog perhaps to Roth's cafeteria as well). And like DeLillo's novel, it underscores the significance of that transition through an anti-intentional and, perforce, symptomatic theory of language. Describing his encounter with the Rasta-man who is to be pivotal in this narrative of re-education (and whose voice appears, as Paul Potter might expect, as an indecipherable "song, a chanting, rolling, and mahogany and bird-

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flight song" [4]), Banks's unnamed narrator and protagonist points to the fundamental premise of that narrative by explaining that "neither of us took the other's descriptions of reality as revealing any reality except that of the teller himself" (5).

But the most significant point of comparison is that for Banks as for DeLillo, as for Roth, the encounter with an oracular other world is at bottom a story about vocation. "I determined to neutralize the effects of my training" (26), Banks's narrator explains, so that Jamaica might provide an occasion "to establish, in place of a point of view, a vision." Jettisoning perspective (here, the tool of the journalist) for inspiration (the gift of the novelist) is strikingly akin to James Axton's exchange of analysis for transcendent pity—a shift that removes us from epistemological or political problems to spiritual problems and that, not incidentally, in the transition from "training" to "vision," happens to serve the needs of a writer pictured as struggling to resume a stalled career.[15] As in DeLillo, then, the international context promises to be a vehicle for developing a selfhood defined by deep, inalienable, creative powers and for abstracting those qualities from the routine performance of a functionary. The only major difference between the two novels in this respect is that in Banks's case, the narrator's expectations turn out to be sadly and utterly deluded.

It's part of the design of Banks's novel to emphasize that point through elaborate plot complications that render summary difficult. (The world of Jamaica is not allegorically stark, in short, but minutely complex, and the narrator's process of education is not the blinding moment of illumination experienced by DeLillo's Axton but an introduction of unresolved confusion.) Suffice it to say that imagining himself a bohemian exile sojourning in a culturally foreign world, our narrator is shocked to discover himself playing something like the role of the American character in a Henry James novel. Rather than the "difference" he expects to find, the narrator discovers the squalid universality of interest, envy, sexual jealousy, and greed. Rather than the struggle between ethnic pride and assimilation he anticipates, he finds the political conflict between Manley and Seaga to be party competition built on crude bossism. The narrator is right to see himself as foreign to Jamaica and dangerous to its people, Banks suggests—though not, as the narrator thinks, because he speaks a different language and has a different culture but because as a tourist without stakes in its local struggles, he's prone to romanticism in a way that enables him to be put to use and leads him to make terrible mistakes. "You can't tell

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the difference between a country's economics and your personal experiences" (288), the narrator's wife acutely notes, taking almost exactly the opposite stance from James Axton's. "That's your problem." For DeLillo, the failure, indeed the inability, to understand others who are essentially foreign appears as a kind of emancipation and, ultimately, as generosity. In Banks, misunderstanding leads only to harm—a point made explicit in the novel's climactic scene, when the narrator, who is discomforted by his unfamiliarity with local mores and armed with a machete he doesn't know how to use, falls into an unintended confrontation that leads him to unwittingly cut off the hand of young man. He had

> disrupted the precise positioning of the crowd there, forcing people to nudge and bump and squeeze against each other in way that confused them . . . making chaos of a structure he hadn't perceived until after he had disrupted it and it was too late. (322–23)

Preoccupied with the beauty of its cultural difference, to which he is exquisitely sensitive, Banks's narrator fails to realize until the novel's concluding pages his ignorance of Jamaica's social organization. Almost point by point, then, *The Book of Jamaica* looks like a striking rejoinder to the attitude apparent in *The Names.* But it would be wrong to call Banks's novel anything like a critique, precisely because, like his narrator, Banks himself seems so strongly drawn to the possibilities he ultimately rejects. It is interesting to note that Banks began his career writing "fictions" in the canonical postmodern style of Donald Barthelme and that both in *The Book of Jamaica* and throughout his career he returns to seductive visions of cultural difference and epistemological deadlock—and to the vision of autonomous intellectual labor with which they are often linked.[16] Indeed, in his later novel *Rule of the Bone,* Banks returns to the terrain of *Jamaica.* Only in this case he puts a latter-day Huck Finn in the role played by his earlier protagonist, describing the youthful Bone as a benighted American who, educated by a spiritually profound Rasta man to the "difference between black people and white people," discovers the ability to imagine himself enslaved by his own culture and thus finds a route beyond being "stuck forever being a white kid" (235) from upstate New York. Where *Jamaica* deflates the American romance, in short, *Bone* resuscitates it euphorically. Perhaps not surprisingly, Banks himself suggests that the moral of the novel is that to be a mature individual, one must "be in control of

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one's own economy" and possess "a trade, a skill" (qtd. in Joyce). In the novel's final line, the protagonist Bone, having seen all his tutelary spirits both killed off and absorbed in his memory, discovers himself a free agent guided by the single words of wisdom he preserves from his benevolent Rasta guide: "Up to you" (390).

But it remains unclear whether we are meant to see Bone's romance as the alternative to American racism that Bone, along with Banks himself (Joyce), suggests, or whether we should regard it as the wistful adolescent fantasy it often seems.[17] More specifically, however much Banks shows himself drawn to the ethos of cultural pluralism common to postmodern writing, and to the visions of professional independence that often go hand in hand with it, his fiction also consistently dramatizes how literally fantastic for most people the thought of controlling one's own economy must necessarily be. For the most renowned of Banks's novels are not lyric romances like *Bone* or ironic romances like *The Names* or allegories of ideological cooptation like so many postmodernist novels but naturalist tales of inevitable doom, in which circumstance and desperation and rage make the project of "active interpretation" appear futile.

That point is made most clearly in *Affliction,* a novel whose narrative frame is constructed on the relations between two brothers, one whose path through higher education has allowed him to escape the privations of a violent working-class background in upstate New York, the other whose increasing desperation leads him down a path of fury and self-destruction. The fact that, as with others among his protagonists, and in keeping with his title (drawn from Simone Weil), Banks gives Wade Whitehouse's self-immolation an air of terror and grandeur already indicates how different *Affliction* is from most postmodernist fiction. Avoiding the picaresque and allegorical style prominent in the work of his contemporaries, Banks also suggests that his protagonist is not merely in the grip of the ideological cooptation that renders Portnoy absurd and Axton hapless but crippled by fury at a damaged life. The point is nicely reinforced by the complicity of Wade's brother, our narrator, in the destruction of his sibling. Wade Whitehouse descends into madness because, in frustration at the mess of his life and dimly aware of schemes of entrepreneurial manipulation that make him (along with his neighbors) tools of more powerful interests, he invents an absurd conspiracy that entirely mistakes the real facts of his world in favor of misplaced symbolic villains. His brother, who both loves Wade and is weary of him, carelessly encourages his quest through

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repeated phone conversations, and the narrative we read is itself cast as a partly speculative invention generated by ambivalent motives. "By telling his story like this, as his brother," the narrator informs us, "I am separating myself from the family and from all those who ever loved him" (1). Like Roth and DeLillo and their contemporaries, Banks casts fiction as a means for the creative intellectual to emancipate himself from the threat of proletarianization. In this context, however, the free play of active interpretation looks less liberatory than an act of desperate self-protection.

§

In this light, Banks might be described as a dissenting voice in the house of postmodernism. He shares attitudes, themes, and some narrative methods with the work of his most prominent contemporaries, but he consistently shows their limitations by emphasizing the role of inequality, privation, and mundane interest that postmodernist writing, with its emphasis on creative reinterpretation, typically leaves aside. In this way he resembles Dale Peck, another recent novelist with whom he may otherwise have very little in common. Peck has recently earned notoriety for a series of critical salvos against the edifice of modernist and postmodernist fiction (a "cultural wrong turn" [*Hatchet Jobs* 173] that has pursued an "esoteric" [182] interest in literary form so far that it now "can't help but tell untruths" [181]), including the infamous declaration that the novels of Don DeLillo are "plain stupid" (185). But aside from their vitriol, the most striking feature of these "hatchet jobs" may be how little distance separates Peck from the targets of his attack. For if the animus of Peck's complaint is that the writings of DeLillo and his peers work sloppily to undermine the distinction between truth and fiction, his dismay proceeds from the widely shared premise that novels are imaginative constructs that shape or distort rather than apprehend reality—that "every fiction is always opposed to some truth" (*Martin and John* 224)—and that in this way they are not distinctive but typical of cognition in general, since "there's no such thing as nonfiction, as empirical truth" (*Hatchet Jobs* 142). As in Banks, however, the result for Peck is less the virtually spiritual consolation apparent in DeLillo than an intense dissatisfaction and a nagging desire to explore the limits of the very premise with which he begins.

Peck's first novel, *Martin and John,* for example, is a highly complicated and intensely romantic novel about the brief relation between the lov-

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ers of the title—which ends when one, Martin, dies of AIDS. We know almost nothing certain about these two men, since the book works by spinning one fabulation after another about their lives—stories in which they are imagined in inconsistent settings, events, and chronologies. All that remains constant (the implicit "reality" that is battled by the many "fictions" of the book) is the fact that there are two lovers, one of whom is older and has died, one of whom is younger and the product of a painful youth as the child of working-class parents. The emotional climax of the novel comes with Martin's horrible death and with an extended meditation that, foregrounding the work of narrative invention, concludes with this baroque passage:

> In the sudden quiet I hear myself sob aloud and I think that at last I've succeeded, for I cry only for myself, and if any thought of Martin remains, or of my mother, or of my father, they founder in a sea of other names, and nameless faces, and in the faces of hundreds of men whom I remember by a common name, a name that remains unconnected to any identity no matter how many times it is assumed. And that name, I must remind myself, is my own: John. (196–97)

If I understand this passage correctly, it is deliberately self-undermining (the very form of the book emphasizes the fact that thoughts of Martin and the parents do remain and consistently regenerate amid the sea of anonymous faces meant to keep them down), and its evident point is that fictions are consolatory and false; that they are intended to contain or dismiss irrevocable, painful truths (death, love, bad but cherished parents); and that they culminate in a hope of ultimately self-annihilating market emancipation. The narrator as fabulist is also the narrator as prostitute here—a grim version of the autonomous professional whose vocational abilities are inseparable from his personal identity. He yearns to overcome the legacy of painful emotional formation through self-reinvention and through trade, but consistently discovers the failure of this hope. The whole point of the book, and the consistent point of Peck's work in general, is the desperation of this moment.

Like Banks, in short, Peck assumes the intellectual repertoire of postmodernist fiction and uses it in a manner that alters its implicit motivations and effectiveness. Rather than the liberatory invention or reinterpretation celebrated explicitly by John Barth and implicitly by

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Roth, Pynchon, DeLillo, and countless of their contemporaries, Peck sees "fictions" as ultimately doomed evasions that seek to but cannot obscure an underlying (and in Peck's case, unrepresentable) truth of suffering and exploitation. One source of this difference might be noted in a feature that is almost entirely missing from Banks's and Peck's work alike. Bureaucracy, along with the peril of routinization—the central animus of postmodern critique—has no place in their work. Writers like DeLillo, Pynchon, and Roth scoff at security and routine, echoing the dissatisfaction of their New Left contemporaries with a political order built around industrial regulation and descended from the New Deal. In Banks's and Peck's novels there is neither security nor regulation to be found. Rather than feeling constrained and yearning for independence, their protagonists are genuine free agents and at the mercy of a hazardous and often brutal world.

Put differently, what Banks and Peck stress rather than bureaucracy is simply the reality of inequality and more particularly the incomprehensible, maddening injuries suffered by their working-class characters. Early advocates of postmodernism sometimes referred to it as a "mentalist" literature, devoted to the problems and powers of "consciousness," and on other occasions defined it simply as "intelligent writing"—a fitting characterization, given how frequently postmodernist fiction celebrates the free play of the creative intelligence and how consistently it casts that ability as constrained by social norms and bureaucratic institutions.[18] That this celebration amounts in particular to a defense of a certain kind of mental labor is suggested by many features of the literature, but takes on a particularly poignant form in Roth's illuminating afterword. There Roth imagines his younger self encountering at the cafeteria a line worker "whose one task is to ladle either meat broth or thickened gravy and to repeat the question: 'juice or gravy'" (*Portnoy's Complaint* 283). Roth describes his young self as "mesmerized and delighted" by the worker's "singsong, accented delivery" of that "four-syllable haiku" (284) and, in what is perhaps the most amazing moment of this brief fantasia, casts the "verbal job" of the worker as directly comparable to that of the novelist and as prefatory to his discovery of the equally formal features of the avant-garde document. "Which *is* less unfair," he asks, "being stuck at a job requiring only three words or at a job requiring three hundred thousand?" (283). The cafeteria worker, in short, plays the same role for Roth that the people of the Acropolis do for DeLillo and that the Rasta

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man appears at first to do for Banks's narrator. As the alien voice (in this case, Sicilian) of an untranslatable language that permits the writer's self-discovery, he is also the occasion for the young Roth both to imagine himself as a laborer and to view his own work as a less routine and more creative form of craft.[19] It is a comparison that depends, as Roth indicates, on the assumption that the only source of unfairness in menial labor is the fact that it is uncreative.

For Roth as for DeLillo, seeing the worker as both like himself and entirely alien depends on viewing his task as haiku. A good comparison might be found, therefore, in a minor yet striking moment in Peck's *Martin and John*. In one of the novel's several stories, the narrator, John, encounters a sign painter on a subway platform whose actions lead John to realize that he is illiterate. As the painter senses John's discovery, he bristles in self-defense, "I *know* what they say. . . . I been writing them all night," and John, stumbling into an awkward and embarrassing exchange, readily intuits the source of his discomfort: "He realized I was aware of his lie, but that didn't bother him as much as the idea that I'd call him on it, that I'd cut through the story he'd been telling everyone, and probably himself" (24). Later, John compares the painter to the working-class parents he would like to forget by saying of his mother and the painter that they "were both messengers with little idea of what they were sending or what would be received, and yet their indirect communication still managed to convey the most vital information" (29).

Like Roth's afterword and DeLillo's redemptive climax, Peck's anecdote is an allegory of fiction and communication. In all cases, the separability of the formal features of language from the intentions of speakers is emphasized. But in the meaning he takes from that premise, Peck differs sharply from DeLillo and Roth. Peck's painter paints signs that have no meaning for him, but in so doing he conveys not just his illiteracy (and in this fashion, his character or identity, as DeLillo might suggest) but his intention to conceal that embarrassment—and thus implicitly his awareness, an awareness largely missing in Roth or DeLillo, of his place in this painful little class drama. As the protagonist notes, "I figured out what you meant" (25). Rather than freedom from usage, the materiality of language only encourages a closer attention to the meanings that other speakers intend and by extension to the social institutions by which they are genuinely constrained.

The implications that Peck draws from this situation likewise differ

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from those of his predecessors. For Roth and DeLillo as for Sukenick and Gass and many of their contemporaries, freedom from the intentions of others is also a way for the creative intelligence to emancipate itself from the restraints of the institution and the perils of proletarianization. Meaningless language allows DeLillo's protagonist, like Roth's, to learn that he inhabits his own distinctive world. For Peck's protagonist, as for Banks's, by contrast, the inability to immunize oneself from the intentions of others entails a painful and often awkward awareness that they share a world with people whose misery can neither be romanticized nor ignored.

Notes

1. The final lines of Roth's novella:

> I looked hard at the image of me, at that darkening of the glass, and then my gaze pushed through it, over the cool floor, to a broken wall of books, imperfectly shelved.
>
> I did not look very much longer, but took a train that got me into Newark just as the sun was rising on the first day of the Jewish New Year. I was back in plenty of time for work. (*Goodbye, Columbus* 136)

2. The drama staged by Roth's afterword echoes almost exactly the argument made by Barth's essay, both emphasizing "baroque" (75) inventiveness (in Barth's term) as the artist's means to prove his "refutation" both of worn-out forms and of the broader fictions that pretend to be contemporary reality. For another piquant expression of this widely shared attitude, see the comments made by Fausto Maijstral in Thomas Pynchon's *V.*, who speaks of "romance" (326) as a type of fiction valuable for the way it enables one "to see past the fiction of continuity, the fiction of cause and effect, the fiction of a humanized history endowed with 'reason.'" Maijstral is significantly a university-educated avant-garde poet and candidate for the priesthood who abandons both vocations when he discovers that he belongs to "an aristocracy deeper and older" (343). Much like Roth, he suggests that this knowledge is consistent with the discovery of "life's single lesson: that there is more accident to it than a man can admit to in a lifetime and stay sane."

3. On the relation of literary modernism to professionalization see Thomas Strychacz and especially Louis Menand 97–132, 165–179. For a provocative suggestion that postmodernism became the literary style naturally suited to salaried writers see Michael Szalay 256–72.

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4. Jerome Klinkowitz points out the way the burst of experimental fiction published by mainstream houses during the later sixties and early seventies coincided not only with growing reader demand for new and challenging work but with the entry of new capital into the publishing industry during a period of general financial liquidity. As Klinkowitz notes, the upshot was great freedom given to youthful editors to sign and publish untried and innovative writers.

5. See Howard Brick.

6. The most influential statement of the organizational synthesis is Robert Wiebe's classic history, *The Search for Order.* See also Louis Galambos.

7. See Steven Brint 10, 39–44, and passim; Elliot A. Krause 29–78; and for a similar analysis in the British context, David Marquand 75–78 and passim.

8. By Hayden's account, the New Left was led by the children of "professional homes" (362) who had been taught "to question and make judgments" and grew up "independent of mind" but found those values betrayed when they "encountered social institutions that denied them their independence" and "waste[d] the talents and energies of millions of individuals" (363). Todd Gitlin later found the origins of the New Left among "educated radicals" whose "principle property" was their "knowledge credentials" (258)—young people especially "angry at managers whose power outran the knowledge that would entitle them to legitimate authority." The most fully elaborated version of these ideas in the explicit political theorizing of the New Left came in the mid-sixties among the defenders of "new working-class theory." See for example Carl Davidson's argument that the New Left might recruit adherents among students and white-collar workers by appealing to the

> instincts of workmanship, his desires to be free and creative, to do humane work, rather than work for profit. We should encourage him . . . to see himself in this light—as a skilled worker—and of his self-interest of organizing on his future job with workers, skilled and unskilled, for control of production and the end to which his work is directed. The need for control, for the power, on and off the job, to affect the decisions shaping one's life in all arenas; developing this kind of consciousness, on and off the campus, is what we should be fundamentally all about. (324)

For an early, dispassionate analysis of the rise of the New Left as an insurgency "aimed . . . at institutionalizing those values, interests, and beliefs fostered by the working conditions of educated white collar workers," see George R.

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Vickers 134 and passim. For a fuller version of the argument sketched here, see Sean McCann and Michael Szalay.

9. The prevalence of this concern in postwar American writing was first pointed out by Tony Tanner in his classic study *City of Words.* More recently, Timothy Melley has updated the theme to argue that the prevalence of conspiracy thinking in postwar American literature and culture addresses what he calls "agency panic" (49)—the experience of a conflict between the ideology of liberal individualism and the reality of large-scale systems of social integration.

10. For the argument that metafictional experiment is a kind of pedagogy imposed on a novel's readers, see for example Brian McHale's representative comment that *Gravity's Rainbow* aims at the "salutary" ("Modernist Reading" 108) goal of "disrupting the conditioned responses" of the slothful reader so as to provide "good training in negative capability" (107). A more general account can be found in McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* 222–27. For a similar perspective, see Hutcheon 202. See especially Wendy Steiner's acute identification of the way postmodern experiment serves "a concerted effort to instruct the reader in the follies of fetishism and the empowerment and interest that can arise instead for the enlightened interpreter" (452).

11. For a brilliant account of the way White's defense of "sublime" history, as a willed escape from the fatalistic acceptance of historical process, is borne out in some of the narrative techniques of postmodern fiction, see Sally Bachner.

12. On the wide-ranging commitment in late twentieth-century American writing to the materiality of the signifier, and on the implications of that commitment, see Walter Benn Michaels. My thoughts throughout this essay are indebted to Michaels's argument.

13. It is not an incidental feature of DeLillo's novel that in the moment after Axton is nearly assassinated by a Greek subversive, he experiences a moment of clarification and mercy directly parallel to his thoughts about his wife's love. "Why was I standing rigid on a wooded hill . . . facing a man with a gun?" (328). The answer is a single word, which is also the most bitter of his wife's complaints against him: "American" (17). The implication is that Axton is both dangerous and vulnerable less for his actions than for his identity, and that this is not ultimately a matter for political or moral judgment:

> When the gunman turned my way, I was at that instant not only the intended victim but had clearly done something . . . to merit his special attention. But he didn't aim and fire. This is the point. It turned out that he didn't know who I was. (328)

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14. Compare the discussion of *The Names* in the illuminating and provocative account of postmodernism advanced by Andrew Hoberek. Hoberek focuses, as I do here, on the way DeLillo's novel and postmodernist fiction in general represent the concerns and interests of an educated professional class. But in other respects our analyses are almost directly contrary. Hoberek argues that the characteristic tone and strategies of postmodernist writing reflect an abandonment of the contrast, central to American fiction of the fifties, between the artist and the organization man: "The postmodern turn comes about when artists abandon this project and instead self-consciously reimagine themselves as laboring within and through the mass cultural forms and formulas against which their predecessors had struggled" (116). It is a turn "underwritten . . . by the ambiguous position of the postwar middle class, structurally proletarianized but not (yet) subject to the loss of income or status" (126). For Hoberek, postmodernism thus reflects an ironic attitude toward the genuine proletarianization of professional labor. In my view, by contrast, postmodernism reflects a perceived entrapment of the creative worker, a perception that serves to help legitimate an expansion in the professional's competitive opportunity and an abandonment of professionalism's traditional ethos of self-regulation and public service. It is fitting in this light that the features of DeLillo's novel that seem most striking to me—Axton's late emancipation from employment and the therapeutic transformation that accompanies it—do not feature prominently in Hoberek's analysis, which places more emphasis on DeLillo's account of the routinized work that precedes Axton's discovery of the mercy and the meaninglessness of language.

15. That difference nicely addresses the question of postmodernist aesthetics, since in Brian McHale's renowned formulation, the difference between epistemological and ontological concerns defines the distinction between modernist and postmodernist fiction. (*Postmodernist Fiction* 3–25 and passim).

16. For Banks in his earlier, Barthelme-influenced phase, see *Family Life* and *The Relation of My Imprisonment*.

17. Banks claims to have revised what he found troubling about *Huckleberry Finn* (Joyce), but it's also the case that *Bone* is full of nagging moral ambiguity. It ends with Bone attaching the memory of the three lives that most affected his own to his creative interpretation of the constellations and remarking in confidence: "For the rest of my life . . . I could wait until dark and look up into the night sky and see my three friends again and my heart would swell with love of them and make me strong and clearheaded" (390). Yet Bone is indirectly responsible for harm to all three of these friends.

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18. "Consciousness has become one of our key terms," writes Ihab Hassan, "replacing Honor, Faith, Reason, or Sensibility as the token of intellectual passion, the instrument of our cultural will" (123). He finds its central representation in the work of writers like Barth, Pynchon, Coover, and Sukenick, who share "a complex desire to dissolve the world—or at least to recognize its dissolution—and to remake it as an absurd or decaying or parodic or private—*and still imaginative*—construct" (141, Hassan's emphasis).

19. From Alberto Pelagutti of *Goodbye, Columbus* through the Cucuzzas of *The Plot Against America*, Italian Americans, with their stereotypical emphasis on physical toughness and lack of emphasis on educational capital, often serve Roth as a counterpoint to the class mobility of Jewish Americans.

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Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace

Paul Giles

If, as Edward W. Soja argued in 1989, postmodernism involved "the reassertion of a critical spatial perspective in contemporary social theory" (2), then the post-postmodern era might be said to have moved beyond the spatial dialectics that implicitly structured twentieth-century culture. The contribution of geographers such as Soja and David Harvey was to restore what Harvey called a "geographical materialism" (359) to sublimated forms of institutional cartography, thereby revealing ways in which modernist notions of hermeneutic and topographic centers, which were particularly prevalent between the world wars, encompassed hierarchical claims about authority that their purported transcendence of spatial dimensions tended silently to occlude. This was the basis for the idealization of the city as a privileged site for modern art and architecture in the 1920s, and conversely, the representation of the American Midwest as banal and culturally stifling in the work of Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and countless other writers. It also contributed to the common idea in the 1950s and 1960s of the suburb as a bastion of conformity existing in a dialectical relationship with the intellectually vibrant metropolis (Jurca 3–6). Postmodernism, of course, tended ideologically to reverse the premises of this authoritarian distinction between center and margin, valorizing the latter at the expense of the former. However, one of the characteristics of David Foster Wallace's work is that it tends to flatten this distinction entirely, supplanting the defensive figure of the suburb as deliberately remote from urban concerns with a new model of the digital network, within which access to information becomes equalized and normalized. Whereas the suburban landscapes of John Cheever or John

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Updike promised, for good or ill, some kind of private retreat from a world of public anxiety, Wallace envisages American space as a level playing field where the electronic media operate in all zones simultaneously.

Wallace's most famous articulation of this position comes in his 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction," which has been seen as a kind of manifesto for his generation of fiction writers, enjoying the same kind of status that John Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) did in an earlier era. In "E Unibus Pluram" Wallace argues that American writers under 40 have been conditioned to a world in which the ubiquity of television is a plain fact. Within this world of "electric signal" (172), stratification operates more by generation than by region: young Americans bond more easily according to which TV programs they have shared than according to the old tenets of geographical proximity. In contrast to the curmudgeonly liberal humanism of Saul Bellow, who complained in 1963 of how "the public nonsense of television ... threatens to turn our brains to farina within our heads" (29), Wallace suggests that the six hours of "TV-training" undertaken daily by the average American "influences the whole psychology of one's relation to himself, his mirror, his loved ones, and a world of real people and real gazes" ("E Unibus" 174). Other developments in information technology, as well as in scientific fields such as biology and genetics, permeate Wallace's fiction to such an extent that the liberal humanist centers of gravity that structured the worlds of Bellow and Updike now seem but a distant cultural memory. Wallace is not a proselytizing or didactic writer, but his texts reflect a condition of confusion where the human sensibility is left uncertain about its epistemological status in an environment where cyborgs and machines are becoming ever more powerful, and conversely, where the categorical distinction between human and nonhuman is becoming ever less self-evident. For example, in "Consider the Lobster," a 2004 essay about the Maine Lobster Festival, Wallace contemplates the festivities from the lobsters' point of view, questioning the received wisdom that they cannot feel anything and wondering whether the lobsters' apparently desperate attempts to avoid being submerged alive in boiling water should not raise uncomfortable questions about the implicit power structures coded into traditional ideas of human authority: "is it not possible," he asks, "that future generations will regard our own present agribusiness and eating practices in much the same way we now view Nero's entertainments or Aztec sacrifices?" (64).[1]

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Aside from problematizing traditional divisions between human and nonhuman, the idea of posthumanism, according to N. Katherine Hayles, emerges from a situation in which "material objects are interpenetrated by information patterns" (*How We Became Posthuman* 13), thereby locating computation, rather than possessive individualism or biological organism, as the ground of being. Posthumanism, as Hayles emphasizes, does not mean the end of the human or of humanity; rather, it takes issue more specifically with humanism, with comfortable liberal assumptions about the sovereignty of the human subject. If the emergence of postmodernism can be attributed contextually to the aftermath of the Second World War, when the collapse of grand modernist narratives centered on a utopian state paved the way for the liberal agendas of multiculturalism and diversity, the provenance of posthumanism can be traced to more specific concerns around the mid-1980s about the extent to which a politics of human identity might ontologically be differentiated from other categories of scientific and biological existence.[2] Such anxieties were impelled partly by rapid developments in information technology during the last quarter of the twentieth century: the first personal computer, the MITS Altair 8080, was released in 1975, and the market developed exponentially after the first appearance of the IBM PC in 1981. Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), which declared that by the "mythic time" of "the late twentieth century . . . we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism" (150), was one of the first academic attempts to map theoretically this revised relationship between mind and matter. Wallace himself graduated from Amherst College in the same year as "The Cyborg Manifesto" was published, and his writing has developed under the intellectual sign of posthumanism.

It is this engagement with posthumanism on a conceptual level that leads Wallace to demystify the figure of the author and downplay the direct significance of biography to artistic creation. He is more interested in the way a writer typifies and embodies his or her culture than in the supposedly exceptional qualities of literary genius; in a review of Edwin Williamson's life of Jorge Luis Borges, for instance, Wallace writes acerbically about how biographers have a vested interest in aggrandizing the lives of writers rather than their works ("Borges"). In this sense, he shares with radical posthumanists such as Hayles and Haraway an intellectual skepticism about the efficacy of the liberal imagination and humanist centers of gravity. But rather than allowing his characters

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simply to become swamped by mass culture, Wallace's fiction seeks to construct a more affective version of posthumanism, where the kind of flattened postmodern vistas familiar from the works of, say, Don DeLillo are crossed with a more traditional investment in human emotion and sentiment. Such representations of sentiment in Wallace are not merely backward looking or nostalgic; instead, he takes the psychological fragmentation endemic to posthumanist cultural landscapes as a fait accompli, but chooses to traverse this terrain with a wide variety of philosophical references, thereby expanding the posthumanist idea beyond the narrow technocratic circle of the cyborg manifesto and showing how, at the turn of the twenty-first century, a posthumanist sensibility has filtered into the everyday consciousness of American life. The disruptive quirkiness of Wallace's writing, together with its emphasis on the stubborn power of the imagination, suggests that posthumanism can wear many different faces, and the austere model of informatics is not the only version available.

Fittingly enough, Wallace's own personal history has many idiosyncratic aspects. He was born in 1962 and grew up in Philo, Illinois, where his father was a professor of philosophy at the University of Illinois at Urbana. In 1980 he went to Amherst College, majoring in philosophy with (unusually for writers) a specialization in math and logic. Five years later he entered an MFA program at the University of Arizona, and he published his first novel, *The Broom of the System,* in 1987. In 1990 he moved back to Illinois to teach writing at Illinois State University, publishing in the same year a nonfiction work on hip-hop culture with his old Amherst friend, Mark Costello. (Although Wallace is generally acerbic about academic prose, he is entirely conversant with its conventions and practices.) His major novel, *Infinite Jest*, over 1,000 pages long, appeared in 1996, and he has also published several collections of short stories: *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989), *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), and *Oblivion* (2004). In addition, he has written a number of long nonfiction articles for *Harper's* and other magazines, some of which were collected in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997) and *Consider the Lobster* (2005). In 2001 he moved from Illinois with his two Labrador retrievers, Jeeves and Drone, to take up a position as the Disney Professor of Creative Writing at Pomona College in California, an endowed chair established by Roy Edward Disney, Walt Disney's nephew and a 1951 graduate of the college.

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Many of Wallace's stories take issue explicitly with the reflexive dimensions of postmodernism, seeking to use human perspectives to subvert a culture of corporate images in which the legends of TV advertising have become naturalized. "Little Expressionless Animals," set in California in 1986, makes use of (and acknowledges) John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" as it describes the mechanical routines of *Jeopardy* contestants in a world where television has become anthropomorphized ("'A special grand prize chosen just for you,' says the television" [31]). This is a cultural milieu within which reflexivity, so far from being a daring intellectual strategy, has now become merely a corporate pastime. This leads the human characters who are adrift in this sea of commercialism to try to retain an idea of human otherness as a means of resisting incorporation into imperial forms of homogeneity: Julie, one of the *Jeopardy* contestants, says that "the whole point of love is to try to get your fingers through the holes in the lover's mask" (32). Similarly, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" argues with postmodernism by intertextually rewriting Barth's 1968 story "Lost in the Funhouse." Wallace's story takes its epigraph from Barth, "For whom is the Funhouse fun?" (232), but parodically recasts it as "For whom is the Funhouse a house?" (259). Set in Collision, Illinois, "Westward the Course of Empire" chronicles the reunion of everyone who has ever taken part in a McDonald's TV commercial, but the burden of Wallace's narrative is that Central Illinois is in fact not a funhouse, not an enclosed, ludic space; on the contrary, "it's the most *dis*closed, open space you could ever fear to see" (242). The theoretical impulse here is, as Marshall Boswell aptly described it, "a metafictional critique of metafiction" (207). Wallace's story suggests that Barth's notion of ironic reflexivity has become thoroughly institutionalized, as much a syndicated brand as McDonald's itself, and that a counternarrative that would reject such reductive commodification involves an element of emotional risk: "What you're scared of has always been what moved you" ("Westward" 349).

On one level, then, there is a sense in which "Westward the Course of Empire" exemplifies a familiar strain of American pastoral. This movement westward epitomizes a paradigmatic shift from corruption into authenticity; indeed, the story that immediately precedes "Westward" in *Girl with Curious Hair*, "Everything Is Green," embodies precisely this kind of pastoralist minimalism, predicated on an ethic of purification and regeneration: "Everything is green she says. Look how green it all is Mitch"

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(230). Many of the American authors Wallace admires—Whitman, William James, Hemingway, Steinbeck—were similarly concerned to project this kind of pastoral imagination at earlier stages of US civilization, and from this perspective Wallace's originality might be said to reside in the way he reconvenes traditional forms of American cultural idealism in a radically alien technological environment.[3] In a 1993 interview, Wallace observed that while Barth, Coover, and Nabokov were "indispensable for their times" (qtd. in McCaffery 146), by the 1990s their kind of postmodern irony had become so commonplace within the culture at large that innovative art needed to push in another direction: "Really good work probably comes out of a willingness to disclose yourself," he said, "open yourself up in spiritual and emotional ways that risk making you look banal or melodramatic or naive or unhip or sappy, and to ask the reader really to feel something" (148–49).

While such validation of common sentiment at the expense of desiccated formal constructions would not have displeased Emerson or Whitman, the unusual aspect of Wallace's writing is the way he starts stylistically from the repetitive strains of popular culture and then works his way back through those systems of accumulation to explore specters of alterity. "Westward the Course of Empire" chronicles the activities of "a generation whose eyes have moved fish-like to the sides of its head, forward vision usurped by a numb need to survive the now" (304). Wallace's characters, bombarded by electronic signals, instinctively crave the safe havens of the familiar; in "Westward," for example, Tom Sternberg is said to be particularly attached to the episodes of *Hawaii 5-0* "he already knows" (270). This allows the author to develop stylistically a minimalist texture, analogous formally to the musical language of Philip Glass and Steve Reich—both mentioned in this story—where the dynamics of repetition create a powerful, indeed mesmerizing aesthetic structure, one in which no simple "outside" is readily available (305–06). Rather than allowing his characters an estranged perspective on the degradations of commercial culture in the manner of Saul Bellow, Wallace positions his dramatis personae as caught up inexorably in the belly of the beast. Just as Whitman dramatized the new industrial landscapes of nineteenth-century America as the condition of the people that he spoke for, so Wallace poetically transforms the new digital landscapes of the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century. Within this orbit, for Wallace as for Whitman, the possibility of transcendence emerges not through trying to

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flee from science but by assimilating and refracting it in elliptical forms.

Part of Wallace's rejection of liberal humanism, then, involves the movement beyond a straightforwardly oppositional critical perspective. In many of his nonfiction pieces for *Harper's* and other magazines—such as his 1996 account of a luxury sea cruise, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again"—Wallace foregrounds his role as someone being paid for his reportage and, therefore, as a compromised observer. Similarly, there is a splendid comic scene in *Infinite Jest* where a graduate student reads *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* the negative account of American popular culture by Frankfurt School theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, while *The Partridge Family* plays on television in the background (450). "I've always thought of myself as a realist," said Wallace of TV culture in a 1996 interview, "it's just the texture of the world I live in" (qtd. in Miller); but this abjuration of a privileged authorial perspective differentiates him sharply from what he calls the antecedent "Me Generation" characterized by writers such as Philip Roth and John Updike. In an amusing review of Updike's 1997 novel *Toward the End of Time,* Wallace undertakes a statistical breakdown of the book, which is set in Massachusetts in 2020 after a Sino-American war has supposedly killed millions and ended US central government: "Total number of pages about the Sino-American war—causes, duration, casualties—0.75. Total number of pages about Turnbull's home, plus fauna, weather, and how his ocean view looks in different seasons—86" (*Lobster* 55–56). And so on, comparing Updike's interest in Mexico's repossession of the American Southwest (0.1 pages) to the hero's feelings about his penis (7.5 pages) and golf (15 pages). Wallace's point is that Updike's work has become increasingly narcissistic, ostensibly concerned with the state of America but really much more centered on the preoccupations of his fictional alter egos.

The stylistic genius of Wallace works in a markedly different way from this. Rather than beginning, like Updike, with familiar human perspectives and then trying (often uneasily) to make inferences about larger social and political contexts, Wallace starts with abstraction and then uses the human element to subvert rigid technocratic patterns. This, perhaps, testifies to the benefit of his academic background in math, logic, and philosophy; he has written a general history of mathematics, *Everything and More* (2003), which reveals a sophisticated understanding of how various numerical systems have been constructed through the ages. He acknowledges in *Everything and More* the assistance of his friend

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Jonathan Franzen, author of *The Corrections,* who has a similar academic background in science (*Everything and More* 306), and of course *Infinite Jest* also plays knowingly with the idea of infinity as a rhetorical trope with wider applications beyond pure science. Equally important in terms of this conditioning toward abstraction is Wallace's proficiency as a junior tennis player: at the age of 14 he was ranked 17th in the US Tennis Association's Western Section, and in his essay "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley" he writes about his childhood career as a "near-great tennis player" (3). He notes that as a Midwesterner he had "grown up inside vectors, lines and lines athwart lines, grids—and, on the scale of horizons, broad curving lines of geographic force," and he finds an analogy between the fixed parameters of the tennis court, 78 by 27 feet, and the rectangular shapes of the Midwestern states, remarking also on the sense of psychic continuity involved in the move from tennis to math in his late teens. *Infinite Jest* is set partly in a tennis academy, where young players are put through all kinds of exhausting training routines in an attempt to help them make it to the "show," as they call the professional tennis circuit. The depersonalizing repetitions associated with these tennis routines turn the vagaries of human life into what *Infinite Jest* describes as a form of "autopilot ritual" (965).

The gruelling aspects for the reader of *Infinite Jest* (1,079 pages, including 96 pages of footnotes) consequently mirror the novel's sombre depiction of American culture as a spiral of obsessions and compulsions, a labyrinthine system from which there is no escape. Tennis, described here as "an essentially tragic enterprise" (84), thus becomes a metonymic emblem of these larger constraints: "You seek to vanquish and transcend the limited self whose limits made the game possible in the first place." *Infinite Jest* is therefore predicated on what the Boston group of Alcoholics Anonymous recognizes as "an individual person's basic personal powerlessness over the really meaningful events in his life" (291); although the American "system is founded on your individual's freedom to pursue his own individual desires" (423), the text portrays a world of fibre-optic pulses and media saturation, a world where "[t]he point of repetition is there is no point" (118). The excess of adjectives and pop-culture neologisms in Wallace's quirky prose—"disgusting marshmallowy Rice Krispie things" (594)—testifies to a landscape where objects have become commodified and commercially overdetermined, as if refracted through the prism of television advertising. This subjects the characters in *Infinite Jest*

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to a landscape of depression and "anhedonia," defined here as "a kind of radical abstracting of everything, a hollowing out of stuff that used to have affective content" (693). These abstractions, related as they are to a failure to connect with human emotions, can also be seen as commensurate with the abstract languages of information technology, oscillating in binary fashion between nought and one; and it is the brilliance of Wallace's fiction to represent these abstractions experientially, from (as it were) the inside. A character in the story "Here and There" claims her boyfriend wants "to be the first really great poet of technology" (155), and that, to some degree, seems to be Wallace's own ambition as well.

Nevertheless, *Infinite Jest* ultimately declines to position the human and the abstract as antithetical, mutually exclusive categories, recognizing that "to be human . . . is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naive and goo-prone" (694), and forthrightly rejecting "that queerly persistent US myth that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive" (695). (The polemical qualities of Wallace's nonfiction essays intrude into the moralizing narrative voice of *Infinite Jest* as well.) The force field of Wallace's fiction turns stylistically on the interface between the human and the machine, between spirit and technology, and it is significant that the kinds of writers for whom he has expressed special admiration—Gerard Manley Hopkins, John Donne, Philip Larkin—tend to be poets interested in both formal limits and their transgression, in the conflict between free play and closed structures: think, for instance, of Hopkins's "sprung rhythm," with its tension between strict patterning and irregular stresses (McCaffery 139). This allows Wallace's narratives to establish intriguing dialectics between a discourse of dehumanization, which defamiliarizes the human body and represents it cartographically, and a nostalgia for more traditional forms of identity. In the story "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men," for example, the hero maps out strategies for sexual seduction and the perpetration of fetishistic practices, which are all acted out to the musical strains of Ligeti; again, there is an edgy interplay between mind and matter, consciousness and corporeal incarnation. While most of Wallace's stories take American mass culture as their donnée, therefore, the author completely disowns the method he attributes to Bret Easton Ellis of simply representing characters by listing brand names, of cynically reflecting a banal and cliché-ridden world through narrative clichés. Wallace has gone on record as saying he believes this kind of writing is merely "fraudulent," and that, on the contrary, "fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human*

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being" (qtd. in McCaffery 131). Yet to be a human being in Wallace's world is not simply to relapse into a sclerotic humanism; instead, it is to search for fragments of authentic personality amidst the razzmatazz of scientific jargon and hip-hop slang, so that a novel such as *Infinite Jest* might be said to involve a putative humanization of the digital sensibility.

One classic story in this mold is "My Appearance." It revolves around an actress's appearance on David Letterman's late-night chat show and the ways she disconcerts her host by being honest about her age, her career, about how she did television commercials "for nothing" (196) in order to get her name before the public again. Rather than simply being "sincere-seeming" (182) in the characteristic manner of network television, Edilyn seeks to resist incorporation into the world of "the ironic eighties' true Angel of Death, D. Letterman"—as Wallace describes the celebrity in his essay on television ("E Unibus Pluram" 180)—and thus to reclaim her own distinct sense of worth. The language in which Edilyn subsequently contemplates her answers to Letterman is resolutely Emersonian:

> Months later, after I'd come through something by being in its center, survived in the stillness created by great disturbance from which I, as cause, was exempt, I'd be struck all over again by what a real and simply right thing it was for a person in such a place to say. ("My Appearance" 200–01)

The glancing reference here to Emerson's essay "Circles," with its ethic of self-centering, suggests the relatively traditional basis for the author's assumptions about moral value. This ascription of a specific ethical purpose to a community is seen again in "Tense Present," the long essay Wallace wrote for *Harper's* in 2001 on the role of language in society. As he mentions in this piece, his mother was a community college teacher of English, so this is an issue he quite literally grew up with. He goes on here to outline the familiar battle lines between "Prescriptivists," who think there are correct uses of language, and "Descriptivists," who believe we should simply accept the evolution of language as it emerges. Wallace himself seeks a middle position, but he points firmly to the kind of confusion that a "misplaced modifier" can create within a social group, and he goes on to suggest that it is more "considerate" (44) to follow the rules of standard written English, "just as it's more 'considerate' to de-slob your home before entertaining guests or to brush your teeth before picking up a date" (48–49). The idea is that everyone is immersed in a system of language

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just as we are within time and space; Wallace cites here Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations,* with its model of a contingent language community, as the basis for his argument about a "community in which we have to get along and communicate with other people" (47).[4]

Wittgenstein also features prominently in *The Broom of the System,* where an old woman in a nursing home, Leonore Beadsman, is said to have studied with the philosopher at Cambridge. Leonore, like her academic master, believes that everything is a language problem—"Being constituted equalled being clogged with linguistic sediment" (73)—and the presence in this story of Vlad the Impaler, a talking cockatiel who effectively imitates and parodies language systems, reinforces the novel's sense that "there's no such thing as . . . extra-linguistic *anything*" (121). The Governor of Ohio here is said to believe that his state is losing its identity, "getting to be one big suburb and industrial park and mall" (54), with the citizens "forgetting the way this state was hewn out of the wilderness"; accordingly, he plans to develop as "a point of savage reference for the good people of Ohio" a Great Ohio Desert, or G.O.D. for short. This speaks, of course, to the fictional nature of local mythologies, but it also indicates an interest on Wallace's part in how communities rhetorically define themselves, a concern that re-emerges in "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All," his remarkable 1993 essay on the Illinois State Fair as a community ritual. Wallace has spoken of his discomfort at the cultural hegemony enjoyed by the two coasts, even though 90 percent of the population of the United States lives in between them, and much of his work explores ways in which the American Midwest is more complex than the journalistic stereotypes about red states and blue states would have us believe. Like David Lynch, whose films he much admires, Wallace probes the strange and unstable aspects of small-town American life.[5]

Part of this strangeness involves the difficulty of defining a distinct region or territory in a situation where the country itself has become subsumed within multinational systems. Mr. Bloehmer in *The Broom of the System* aptly describes "the Midwest" as "a place that both is and isn't":

> How to begin to come to some understanding of one's place in a system, when one is part of an area that exists in such a troubling relation to the rest of the world, a world that is itself stripped of any static, understandable character by the fact that it changes, radically, all the time. (142–43).

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Later in the novel, Dr. Curtis Jay metaphorically equates therapy with a process of locating the self in relation to a normative grid or pattern:

> A tea-bag in hot liquid strikes this psychologist as a perfect archetypal image for the disorienting and disrupting influence of a weak-membraned hygiene-identity network on the associations of distinct networks in relation to which it does, must, understand itself. (343)

The aptly named Fieldbinder similarly sees the self as "at the node of a fan-shaped network of emotions, dispositions, extensions of that feeling and thinking self" (351). The points of interface between self and other are highlighted here as crucial nodes of intersection that allow the self to map its place in the world. Bloehmer describes the human skin as a critical boundary between internal and external realms, going on to remark how the residents of the Shaker Heights nursing home have found outside forces puncturing their skin to such an extent that it is "no longer a viable boundary" (365). Identity, in this formulation, is the property of a properly functioning machine that can recognize and negotiate its home boundaries while simultaneously positioning itself in relation to larger spheres. In a situation where politics, medicine, and religion (with its fund-raising TV channels and its 1-800 numbers) have become part of this consumerist cycle, the challenge for Wallace's characters, as Sven Birkerts observes, is to come to terms with the energies of "decentering" and networking that new information technologies have released into the country's midst.

One response to this environment in Wallace's writing takes the form of mordant satire. The story "Mister Squishy" describes sardonically a market research company organized around focus groups, media campaigns, and cable television stations, where "Make a Difference" has become simply a slogan in low-budget advertising (48). "The Suffering Channel" similarly charts life among the interns of *Style*, a magazine based in New York but owned by a German conglomerate that controls 40 percent of all US trade publishing. But the issue of corporate ownership also takes on eerie ontological dimensions here, with *Style* magazine's offices located in the World Trade Center in July 2001. There are a few indirect references to 9/11, "the tragedy by which *Style* would enter history two months hence" (245), scattered in the text: of Ellen Bactrian, for example, we are told at one point that "she had ten weeks to live" (326). This lends Wallace's narrative, albeit in an oblique and understated way, a

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structure of overarching dramatic irony, where the reader gradually becomes aware of the characters being caught up in labyrinthine systems of which they necessarily remain largely unaware. Zadie Smith described it as characteristic of Wallace's generation of writers that they amalgamate a bright surface world of corporate images and media savvy with underlying anxieties about accident, catastrophe, and death (xv), and it is exactly this blend of knowingness and insecurity that galvanizes Wallace's fiction. In "Oblivion," the piece that gives Wallace's 2004 collection of short stories its title, the narrator, who serves as "Assistant Systems Supervisor" in an unnamed insurance company, agrees to come with his wife to the Darling Sleep Clinic because of their problems sharing a bed at night. As part of the treatment, he is filmed asleep, with the clinic producing sleep pattern charts that he compares to the cash flow graphs he scrutinizes by day. The narrator is troubled by seeing his own face asleep, "not a face I in any way recognized or 'knew'" (236); but this transposition of human personalities into anonymous shapes and figures remains, disconcertingly, a latent potential in Wallace's fiction. In this sense, the "oblivion" of the title suggests not only a loss of consciousness but also a loss of territorial security and self-definition.

For Wallace, this displacement of autonomy and erasure of safe domestic boundaries carries political as well as psychological implications. In *Infinite Jest,* the USA itself has collapsed and been replaced by O.N.A.N., the Organization of North American Nations, with 11th November now celebrated as "Interdependence Day" among the constituencies of the US, Canada, and Mexico. O.N.A.N. is the brainchild of Johnny Gentle, who gets elected president of the US by running as a candidate of C.U.S.P., the Clean US Party. President Gentle subsequently transports the nation's waste into a sparsely populated region of Vermont, New Hampshire, and upstate New York, turning it into a vast toxic dump, before forcing Canada to annex this area so it will not soil US purity. As N. Katherine Hayles has observed, however, Wallace's fictional subjects are sutured into recursive cycles and feedback loops; again there is an analogy with tennis, where, as the academy coach says, the idea is "to send from yourself what you hope will not return" (*Infinite Jest* 176)—although, alas, too often it does. In *Infinite Jest,* the fallacy of the notion of the US as a place set apart is exposed through the underground seepages and labyrinthine pathways through which abject waste matter cycles back to its source, a return of serve that sheds an ironic light on the old Puritan legend of a sanctified

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nation. *Infinite Jest* thus not only critiques the idea of American exceptionalism experientially, showing how US citizens are becoming more uneasy as their borders become more permeable, but also demystifies it politically: in a multinational, interdependent world, the notion of the US as a protected, pristine space has been rendered null and void.

The coruscating brilliance of Wallace's posthumanist style is to find objective correlatives for this American experience of dislocation, to describe how globalization works not just as a distant political theory but as something that affects the hearts and minds of the national community. One of the characters in "The Suffering Channel" feels himself to be "not a body that occupied space but rather just a bodyshaped area of space itself" (313); and it is precisely this sense of disturbing interplay between metaphysical presence and absence that haunts Wallace's fiction. Whereas Donald Barthelme and Robert Coover used the ironic depthlessness of postmodernism to hollow out modernist claims to central authority, Wallace turns this irony back against the postmodern condition itself, establishing what Marshall Boswell has called a "complex structure of doubled self-reflexivity" (96) where the ironization of irony leaves scope for tantalizing glimpses of authentic presence. This again differentiates Wallace from DeLillo, in whose novels the hard-edged, abstract qualities of globalization tend to take on aspects of the sublime. For example, in *Cosmopolis* the "glow of cyber-capital" is described as "radiant and seductive" (78), with DeLillo's narrative implicitly paying homage to "the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet's living billions" (24). By contrast, Wallace's fiction resists this awestruck posture and positions itself at a more ironic point of intersection between the ghost and the machine. If DeLillo's rigorous impersonality involves a metaphorical displacement of the austerities of medieval ritual into the more material realms of twenty-first-century America, Wallace's intellectual agenda takes its bearings from alternative sources, being concerned as it is primarily to resituate the affective and emotional life of American romanticism in an apparently alien social and historical milieu.[6]

In this sense, Wallace can be understood as in some ways quite a traditional American writer, one with affiliations to a tradition of Midwestern realism as well as the kind of metaphysics of presence that permeate the work of Emerson and Thoreau. If DeLillo might aptly be described as an

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iconoclastic antihumanist, Wallace is more of a sentimental posthumanist, a writer for whom the legacies of human spirit still carry a cathectic charge. Such residual presence does not, of course, involve the representation in Wallace's texts of unfractured consciousness, but rather something like a phenomenological awareness of the fluid processes involved in the creation and destruction of meaning in the world. In his essay "Art and Space," Heidegger described the idea of locality as paradoxically intertwined with erasure—"clearing-away brings forth locality preparing for dwelling" (5)—and Wallace's own sense of the relationship between the human and the spatial, between place and placelessness, involves similar forms of double crossing. This emerges, for instance, in the story "Here and There," where the narrator counters the idea of corporate homogeneity by suggesting that "Maine is different from, fundamentally other than both Boston and Bloomington" (156); the question, not so easy as it seems, is how "here" can be distinguished from "there." In this way, Wallace's fiction speaks to a new kind of American regionalism, one predicated less on the distinct properties immanent within any given place than on the cartographies relating "here" and "there" to all-encompassing global networks.

Like his friend and rival Jonathan Franzen, then, Wallace takes the new worlds of computer science and global media as givens, but he seeks to open up spaces within these abstract grids of information technology where human emotion and identity can be explored.[7] Many versions of American pastoral, going back through the nineteenth century, have sought to create a protected space from which technological progress was simply excluded: one thinks of Sarah Orne Jewett's stories set in rural Maine, for example. But both Franzen and Wallace reject such a notion of retreat and attempt instead to render a more complex version of contemporary life, one that opens up crevices in the monolithic structures of corporate America and confronts the question of personal authenticity even within a global framework of displacement and irony. Wallace's technomorphic fiction thus mediates the dynamics of globalization, subtly recording how the mass media impacts upon and interferes jarringly with the lives of American citizens. In a creatively sentimental redescription of posthumanism, Wallace's narratives articulate ways in which the human consciousness responds to this environment by internalizing local scenes and harnessing the self-centered nature of being as a way of mapping itself onto the wider world.

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Notes

1. In the 2005 reprint of this essay, "Aztec sacrifices" has been altered to "Mengele's experiments" (253).

2. On postmodernism and the Second World War, see Sollors 74.

3. For Wallace's favorite authors, see the interview with Laura Miller.

4. In a 1993 interview Wallace said: "We're *in* language . . . it's not that language *is* us, but we're still *in* it, inescapably, the same way we're in like Kant's space-time" (qtd. in McCaffery 144).

5. See Wallace's essay "David Lynch Keeps His Head."

6. See Thomas Peyser on DeLillo's depiction of "the force with which the processes and consequences of globalization impinge upon the individual mind" (255). DeLillo's analogy between medieval ritual and contemporary patterns of globalization emerges most powerfully in *Underworld*.

7. For an account of how the success of *Infinite Jest* inspired Franzen to complete his novel *The Corrections*, see Boswell 20.

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The Children of 1965: Allegory, Postmodernism, and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Min Hyoung Song

Jhumpa Lahiri was already a celebrated author when her first novel appeared in print. Her short story "Interpreter of Maladies" was selected for the O. Henry Prize and for inclusion in *Best American Short Stories.* Her book of collected stories, *Interpreter of Maladies,* won the Pulitzer Prize in literature. And in the following year, *The New Yorker* named her one of the 20 most important young American writers of the new century. It is not surprising, therefore, that *The Namesake* attracted widespread press coverage. Reviewers foregrounded the novel's mastery of form, focused on specific moments in the text when the author's skills were clearly in evidence, and compared her favorably to other contemporary authors who seemed, in contrast, overly self-indulgent (Kakutani, Kipen, Metcalf, Caldwell). If reviewers were in agreement about Lahiri's abilities as a writer, however, their enthusiasm about the originality of her storytelling was more muted. David Kipen observed:

> Theme-wise, *The Namesake* marks no special advance over *Interpreter of Maladies.* It's a novel about an immigrant family's imperfect assimilation into America. . . . A certain sameness begins to creep in midway through the book—explicable, if not completely excusable, as its picaresque hero's compulsion to trace the same neurotic patterns over and over.

In many ways, the ordinary nature of *The Namesake*'s narrative distances it from other ethnic novels, which tend, as Mark McGurl has recently

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argued, to combine "the routine operations of modernist autopoetics with a rhetorical performance of cultural group membership preeminently, though by no means exclusively, marked as ethnic" (117). By "autopoetics," McGurl refers to the reflexivity found in the experimentation of highly esteemed contemporary fiction; this reflexivity is not so much a radical break from modernism as it is the "continuing interest of literary forms as objects of a certain kind of professional research" (111). The combination, then, of an intense focus on form with a preoccupation with ethnicity leads to a "high cultural pluralism" (117)—a phrase that describes an impressive array of authors from Jews like Philip Roth and Saul Bellow to Native Americans like N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Louise Erdrich; Asian Americans like Maxine Hong Kingston and Chang-rae Lee; Chicanas like Sandra Cisneros; and African Americans like Ralph Ellison, Ishmael Reed, and Toni Morrison. More impressive still, authors who don't have the same claim to the ethnic as these do nevertheless organize their work as if they were writing ethnic novels, minoritizing the lower middle class (Raymond Carver), Vietnam War veterans (Tim O'Brien), Southern culture (Flannery O'Conner), and even white techno-nerds (Neal Stephenson). Far from thinking of postmodern fiction and the ethnic novel as dividing the "postwar literary field" (120), a focus on high cultural pluralism suggests that the postmodern is intimately related to what the late Arthur Schlesinger Jr. famously denounced as a "cult of ethnicity" (41).[1] If so, what are we to make of a novel like *The Namesake,* which clearly combines an intense awareness of its own form (which reviewers quickly picked up in their celebration of the author's craft) with a definite ethnic marking, but does so without the experimentation—nor the angst such experimentation routinely gives expression to—that we have come to recognize as indicative of serious postwar American fiction?

In response to this question, I wish to suggest that a generational shift in perspective has taken place. The cultural landscape that confronted an earlier cohort of pioneering high cultural postwar novelists required hard work to make imaginable the phenomena we have come to group under the capacious and aging sign of postmodernism; these are phenomena like the accelerated time/space compression of late capitalism, the feverish self-fashioning of individuality that is wholly consonant with the consumerism such capitalism relies on, the hypermobility of populations within and across borders of various kinds, and the dominance of biopolitics and

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its intertwining with geopolitics.[2] The narrative of *The Namesake,* on the other hand, can assume the pressures such phenomena have placed on the concept of the nation and must furthermore contend with a mainstream that has fully mastered the rhetoric and formal innovations associated with postmodern fiction. This mainstreaming seeks, especially through a focus on reproduction and borders, to reverse or at least deny the existence of these same phenomena, with characters like the ones that arrest Lahiri's attention often employed as a solution.

In the first half of this essay I explore the anxious preoccupation with what Lee Edelman calls "reproductive futurism" (2) as a fantasmatic project of unification, an always deferrable and hence always potentially perfect moment of possibility represented by our vocal, if frequently empty, adoration of children. Such an investment in the allegorical meaning of childhood is meant to secure a common horizon against the crises of national identity that postmodernism helped articulate. In *The Namesake,* as I argue in the second half of this essay, Gogol finds himself struggling against the yoke of allegorical expectations as an embodiment of the Child: either choose assimilation into a cultural unity that desperately needs—in its ever more visible density as fantasy—to be shored up by such an affirmation or choose an allegiance to a pluralism that can be as suffocating as what it seeks to supersede. What this novel thus dramatizes is not the need to suture over the crises of national meaning in which it finds itself caught up, and thus somehow to move beyond the tired platitudes of postmodernism, nor to offer an alternative that may be another attempt at suturing. Rather, *The Namesake* dramatizes the difficulty of allowing its characters to be fully penetrated by a moment of multiple and converging crises that offer no magical routes toward resolution, a moment that may, in fact, present itself as not interested in resolutions of any kind.

§

The ethnic bildungsroman, with its interest in children and borders, is a form that has long been a source of anxiety for Asian American literary studies. Many of the works canonized by this field seem to fit within the strictures of this form and simultaneously, as critics have sought to elucidate, to spill over these strictures. Lisa Lowe exemplifies this position when she points out how Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* "narrates the

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protagonist's development from the uncertainty, locality, and impotence of 'youth' to the definition, mobility, and potency of 'maturity'" only to trouble "the closure and reconciliation of the bildungsroman form" in calling attention to the complexities of Philippine culture and demands for Anglo American conformity found in the prewar years (45). Similarly, in his more recent discussion of John Okada's *No-No Boy,* a novel widely read as resistant to orthodox accounts of Japanese American internment, Daniel Kim observes how its ending figures exactly the kind of reconciliation that Lowe mentions through the travails of its main character Ichiro Yamada, a former internee who was jailed for refusing to take a loyalty oath. About the ending's surprisingly optimistic endorsement of a "faint and elusive insinuation of promise" found in a "tiny bit of America" (Okada 251), Kim concludes:

> The history of betrayal that has shaped Ichiro's consciousness endows him with an abiding capacity to see other potentially disloyal subjects of color as needing—as he has been—to be brought into the fold: to be integrated into the body of the nation or into the world capitalist system that the nation presides over. (80)

The anxiety over the ethnic bildungsroman exhibited by these two examples undoubtedly stems from the way this form might be read as narrating how Asian American characters learn to collaborate with nationalist projects of suppressing dissent at home and consolidating power abroad.

For Asian American authors in the late twentieth century, such a narrative expectation of reconciliation—between aggrieved minority and the nation-state that has so often been the source of racial grief—has meant that their characters could easily become a composite model for other minorities to emulate, a social ideal of suppressed anger and a constantly performed willingness to get along. As Inderpal Grewal argues, more than Kingston's *Woman Warrior* or Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club,* the postwar narrative that provides the ethnic bildungroman's end-of-the-century "full expression" is Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine:*

> The first-person narrative of a Hindu girl living in Punjab, India, whose family has been displaced after the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the novel describes her struggles within India, how she reached the United States, and her life in the United States. (65–66)

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This narrative also includes the murder of her husband by Sikh terrorists; her rape by white men she has paid to lead her illegally into the US; a love triangle between herself, a white man, and another white man who is a paraplegic living in Iowa; and the adoption of a boy from Vietnam. "Within this narrative," Grewal observes,

> America becomes the locus for Jasmine's emergence as an individual with desires and "choices." Here we see the link between biopolitics and geopolitics in that security and care are believed to be impossible in Punjab because of the inherent violence attributed to its populations, but in America safety, security, and "ordinary" life are possible. (67).

A similar kind of division might be found in Lahiri's "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" (in *Interpreter of Maladies*), a story about a young Indian American girl named Lilia growing up in a tidy, safe suburban home in New England. In between attending middle school and going trick-or-treating on Halloween, she is bewitched by a family guest, the Mr. Pirzada of the title, who is conducting research in the US while his family remains behind in what will soon become Bangladesh. At the start of the story, Pakistan's civil war has just broken out:

> In March, Dacca had been invaded, torched, and shelled by the Pakistani army. Teachers were dragged onto streets and shot, women dragged into barracks and raped. By the end of the summer, three hundred thousand people were said to have died. (23)

It would be easy to read this contrast between the placidity of Lilia's life and the violence of Pakistan's civil war as reinforcing the conventional division between America and the rest of the world found in *Jasmine,* but as Rajini Srikanth points out, if Lilia grows up to affirm this division it will partly be because her budding interest in that other part of the world "was swiftly and efficiently suppressed by a grade-school teacher focused on educating her students about the intricacies of the American Revolution" (51).[3] What I wish to point out about this story is how subtly this self-reflexive point is made through the use of a scrupulous realism. Like this and the other stories in *The Interpreter of Maladies, The Namesake* is also noteworthy for its lack of interest in the formal innovation associated with postmodern storytelling even as it maintains a strong interest in the narrative doubling of thought back onto itself, a postmodernlike reflexiv-

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ity that excavates through such a return the different layers of meaning that beliefs of various kinds rest on.

The novel begins, for instance, with the mother who is giving birth to Gogol, and in doing so signals from the start the ways in which it will refuse to sensationalize what it nonetheless recognizes as a difficult struggle:

> For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. . . . Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (49–50)

To identify foreignness with pregnancy, as this passage suggests, is also to understand that such an identification entails a burden, at once revered as the deliverer of the future—someone who guarantees the perpetuation of life-making practices that connect through time, so that the future is in fact the selfsame repetition of an ancient past—and held up as an anthropological curiosity. A curiosity's privacy can be violated by anyone, as when strangers feel no taboo against touching the protruding bellies of pregnant women or the cheeks of newborn infants. Curiosity can also easily be confused with disdain, just as maternal burden can be confused with social burden, as when a mother with dependent children becomes the hated welfare mother.

The fact that Ashima is both pregnant and a foreigner enables her, according to the novel, to see the paradox of her situation more clearly than others, to imagine at once the range of meanings her particular pregnancy can represent and what it cannot ultimately guarantee. When her doctor assures her that all is "perfectly normal," she thinks:

> For the past eighteenth months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all. . . . Throughout the experience, in spite of her growing discomfort, she'd been astonished by her body's ability to make life, exactly as her mother and grandmother and all her great-grandmothers had done. That it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still. But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare. (5–6)

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In this passage, Ashima points to the narrative that pregnancy seems unquestioningly to encapsulate. Indeed, to call it a narrative is already to call attention to something that seems perfectly commonsensical. Pregnancy normally, and normatively, inspires thoughts of generational continuation, a stitch of life experience that connects one woman to all the women before who have endured the same pain of making life in their wombs. This is, as Lee Edelman writes, "a fantasmatic order of reality in which the subject's alienation would vanish into the seamlessness of identity at the endpoint of the endless chain of signifiers lived as history" (8).

Such a "politics *of* the Symbolic," Edelman goes on to elaborate, using Lacanian language, "allegorizes or elaborates sequentially, precisely *as* desire, those overdeterminations of libidinal positions and inconsistencies of psychic defenses occasioned by what disarticulates the narrativity of desire" (9; Edelman's italics). Each act thus becomes a ritual of repetition, a guarantor of meaning as it is passed down biologically from one generation to the next, from great-grandmothers to grandmothers to mothers to daughters who will someday become mothers. Each sensation, each pain, each urge of the pregnant body is experienced as one more iteration of the same, nothing happening to Ashima that hasn't already happened to the women in the family before her, rendering each experience a return to experience felt intuitively at some almost primordial species level. There is something miraculous about this apparent timeless "chain of signifiers," to be sure, the sameness that connects across time through an experience of regular rejuvenation, of fertile wonder, of a biological initiation into an identity of motherhood that never changes—even as such a narrative excludes as "what disarticulates" other women who may not have, or want, access to such an experience. It is enticing to consider this allegory as no allegory whatsoever.

But as Ashima helplessly acknowledges, the meaning of motherhood changes and alters over time, calling attention to a narrativity that seeks to hide behind the guise of something more primordial. The fact that Ashima is giving birth to Gogol in a foreign land calls to the surface the "tentative and spare," the fragility of a belief that some things never change. The strangeness of the surroundings for Ashima, the realization that she is for the first time in her life alone when she is in the maternity ward, highlights the fiction of the narrative of pregnancy, the ways in which rituals vary from place to place (and across time) and the experience is never the same for one woman as it is imagined for another. The

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"nothing . . . normal" of Ashima's stay at the maternity ward calls into question the "perfectly normal." For Ashima, whose name means limitless, professional normalization fails to reassure. The meaning of her name is apt because she engages so deeply with the seamless continuity promised by the narrative of pregnancy and also—tripping a too-Bunyanesque approach to allegory—inappropriate because she calls attention to this narrative's transience and vulnerability despite her best efforts to the contrary.

In this way, the opening moment of the novel conjures a thorny theoretical dilemma that centers on what Edelman calls "reproductive futurism" (3). This is, Edelman explains, "the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics" because the Child, which is its object of veneration, is

> the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention. Even proponents of abortion rights, while promoting the freedom of women to control their own bodies through reproductive choice, recurrently frame their political struggle, mirroring their anti-abortion foes, as a "fight for the children." (3)

Against this horizon, and against those who wish to draw gays and lesbians somewhere safely within its boundaries, Edelman wishes to define the queer as a negation of such a future orientation, a refusal that is also a courageous ethical move:

> By denying . . . our disidentification from the promise of futurity, those of us inhabiting the place of the queer may be able to cast off that queerness and enter the properly political sphere, but only by shifting the figural burden of queerness to someone else. The *structural position* of queerness, after all, and the need to fill it remain. (27)

By accepting one's role as the villain of reproductive futurism, a foil it must have to make visible the future it wishes to secure, the queer willfully occupies a position that another would otherwise have to occupy. In addition to the pleasure of altruism such an act might afford, there is also for Edelman the pleasure of refusing a coercive morality founded on the well-being of the Child, an unimaginable kind of freedom to imagine a politics not predicated on the reproduction of the present into the future. And finally, such a willful acceptance of an intolerable position would

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preserve for queers something other than complete abnegation endorsed by both foe and ally: "for the right wing the nothingness always at war with the positivity of civil society; for the left, nothing more than a sexual practice in need of demystification" (28).[4]

This argument, in its attempt to avoid what might be thought of as the resistance paradigm, enables an interesting perspective from which to explore the cultural meanings that the children of 1965 have begun to assume. By "children of 1965" I mean something historically quite specific (which might also suggest how my perspective drifts from Edelman's). Much has, of course, been written about the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act and its impact on the rapidly changing demographic picture of the United States, especially the way it favored the immigration of professionals from a capaciously defined Asia. While these adult arrivals have attracted, and continue to attract, considerable attention, their children have also been the object of great interest. For years we have heard rumblings about them, from media hype about Asian whiz kids in the 1980s to anti-Affirmative Action arguments in the 1990s that pointed to their disproportionate numbers in colleges and universities.[5] And now, at the start of the new century, large numbers of these children are becoming full-fledged adults and occupying professional positions of their own. Some of the earliest popular first-person attempts to make sense of what their coming of age might mean have favored an accommodating stance. For instance, in his memoir *The Accidental Asian*, the former speech writer for the Clinton administration and graduate of Harvard Law School Eric Liu repeats what has already been said about the most visible of his generation: they are uniformly privileged and well educated; little makes them different from their professional white peers; race is only a residual concern for them (not having felt the sharp pain of *de jure* discrimination nor in some cases *de facto* prejudice); being perceived as Americans is more important than whatever attenuated ties they might have to the Asian countries from which their forebears may have departed; and their experiences are merely the most contemporary, albeit accelerated, iteration of the immigrant narrative as told by successive waves of ethnic Europeans.

Rather than reject these claims outright as an uncritical retelling of the ethnic bildungsroman, which they surely are, I want to linger for a moment over the consequences of accepting these descriptions at face value. In doing so, I build on the works of critics like Tomo Hattori, Viet

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Thanh Nguyen, Kandice Chuh, James Kyung-Jin Lee, and Rey Chow, all of whom have been pushing hard against the fascination with resistance that has been a mainstay of many minority discourses for more than two decades now. If we were, then, to accept what Liu says as accurate of at least some individual experiences, one conclusion we might reach is that members of this elite group are remarkable exactly because they fit so neatly—perhaps too neatly—into the ideal of mainstream American life. At a time when everyone seems to consider themselves aggrieved, even Christians who worry that Christmas is being taken away from them (Rich), a number of the children of Asian immigrants who arrived in the United States during the last third of the twentieth century seem effortlessly to claim the mantle of a national ideal. "I don't mean," Liu writes, "that my parents told me to act like an American. That's partly the point: they didn't tell me to do anything except be a good boy" (37). As Wendy Brown has observed (faintly echoing Schlesinger's denouncement of "the cult of ethnicity"), without the ideal that Liu and his cohort seem willingly to embody, "politicized identities would forfeit a good deal of their claims to injury and exclusion" (61). Such identities are therefore "wounded attachments" to the extent that they allow one to be defined as—for lack of a better term—victimized because cast outside the glow of an ideal and deprived of the material rewards that such a glow entails. So focused are these attachments on their sense of dwelling in the malignant shadow of this ideal, Brown asserts, that they become dependent on it for their very self-definition. If so, what does it mean to have an identity defined as an embodiment of what wounds? What does it mean for a member of a racial minority to be a "good boy"? Or as Vijay Prashad asks more bluntly, "How does it feel to be a solution?" (6)

This is the question that Ashima is literally giving birth to at the start of *The Namesake*. Although her son Gogol is not white, he might as well be. Although he is not sexist or homophobic, his gender and sexual identity never puts him at risk of feeling their punch. Although he does not look down on his fellow South Asian Americans and other minorities who cannot share in his professional middle-class largess, he cannot claim any special knowledge about what it means to be, say, a Bangladeshi taxi driver in New York City:

> The driver of the cab is a Bangladeshi; the name on the registration card pasted to the plexiglass behind the front seat says

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> Mustafa Sayeed. . . . If his parents were in the cab they would have struck up a conversation with the driver, asking what part of Bangladesh he was from, how long he'd been in this country, whether his wife or children lived here or there. Gogol sits silently, as if he were any other passenger, lost in his own thoughts. (199)

Gogol is *not* a member of a model minority, the fulfillment of the ethnic bildungsroman, if by this we are referring to the ways in which Asian Americans as a race are esteemed as self-sufficient, hard-working, culture-bound, and family-oriented in order to berate other racial minorities in the United States who supposedly do not exhibit these traits. Rather, he is an exemplary representative of the Asian children of post-1965 immigrants of professional background who have been lovingly and anxiously fantasized into existence over the past several decades. Against the ideal Gogol embodies, all groups, including whites and other Asian Americans, are starting to feel berated. If queers are, according to Edelman, reproductive futurism's negation, then the children of 1965 are its objects of veneration, the Child on whose behalf contemporary politics is mobilized even as others feel the sharp pinch of never being fully capable of living up to the potentiality the Child embodies or, worse, targeted in the name of preserving this potentiality—as, ironically, many South Asian Americans have been since September 11, whether they are like the driver in the quotation above or professionals like Gogol and his family.

There is, to be sure, absolutely nothing queer about Gogol, especially if by queer we mean a "negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (Edelman 9), and yet it might be said that there is at least something strange in the vigor with which he is expected to get along, to fit in, and to excel at whatever he is doing. Therefore, before we celebrate the privileges afforded in being an object of veneration, we should pause to consider how Gogol's example hints at how occupying the position of the Child might simply be as much of an imposition as being cast into the roll of the villain. Neither villain nor Child is allowed to live, both being always oriented toward "a future that's unattainable because always still to come" (Edelman 83) and therefore never anything more than a placeholder for what is missing in the present, a magical solution to the multiple crises afflicting a strong sense of nationhood. Gogol hardly ever seems like a child because he is laden so completely by the allegorical

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expectation that he will achieve the future that he supposedly already embodies, while simultaneously always appearing childlike in the way others treat him.[6]

From birth, Gogol is thrust into the position of the Child, and even as he grows into young adulthood he finds he cannot quite shake off the childlike demeanor of his allegorical social position. He continues therefore to struggle with the not always pleasant feeling of being a marionette whose lifelikeness distracts from the strings pulled by a puppeteer. Allegory as a critical term is attractive in making sense of the experiences Gogol encounters, because it captures this feeling of dependence and its larger implications—what Paul de Man characterizes as "the illusion of a continuity that it knows to be illusionary" (qtd. in Edelman 96).[7] At six months of age, family and friends gather around the baby Gogol to predict his future in a ritual that is meant to be allegorical in this way, an illusion that invites enjoyment as such. Before him are placed several items, each representative of the person he might become: "Most children will grab at one of them, sometimes all of them, but Gogol touches nothing.... Gogol frowns, and his lower lip trembles. Only then, forced at six months to confront his destiny, does he begin to cry" (40).

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As much as this incident points to how much others wish him to conform to their expectations about what shape his life should take, we can also see in his refusal to choose an unwillingness to bend to the logic of enchantment that is at the core of allegory. His refusal is an expression of obstinate passivity. Gogol is a character who rejects what is offered to him, who turns away no matter how he is prompted from making a choice that is really no choice. In this ceremony, others are guiding his hand, demanding he become what others would like him to become, reflecting what the guider believes more than what Gogol himself might want. All the encouragements he receives to reach one way or another merely betray the prejudices and desires of the adults around him: "'Put the money in his hands!' someone in the group calls out. 'An American boy must be rich!' 'No!' his father protests. 'The pen. Gogol, take the pen'" (40). At this moment, Gogol is nothing more than a kind of screen upon which others are projecting their social meanings. Gogol's response, then, might be understood as a precocious refusal to reflect back to others what

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they expect of him. In doing so, he models for the reader the difficulty of refusing the call of allegory, since any interpretation could seem to be an acquiescence to this call. Any movement Gogol makes at six months of age might be understood as portending the continuity of his present self with an avowedly illusionary future.

Like the objects placed before Gogol when he is an infant, romantic partners are also presented as full of allegorical meaning, because they are representative of the promise reproductive futurism makes through "the fantasy of heterosexual love, and the reproductive Couple it elevates" (Edelman 82). This promise gestures again to the Child, which the union between two people of the opposite sex will someday presumably conceive, and the future that such a Child is meant to secure for the present. Unlike the game his elders played with him when he was six months old, however, the romantic choices he makes are not illusions that give pleasure by being disclosed as such. Romance more resembles the experience of Ashima's pregnancy, an allegory that wishes to disavow itself as allegory. His first girlfriend Ruth, for example, suggests a particular vision of American identity, one forged in the progressive countercultural formations of the 1960s, into which Gogol might merge:

> She tells him she was raised on a commune in Vermont, the child of hippies, educated at home until the seventh grade. Her parents are divorced now. Her father lives with her stepmother, raising llamas on a farm. Her mother, an anthropologist, is doing fieldwork on midwives in Thailand. (110)

According to this passage, Ruth is a product of utopian enthusiasts. The latter are seeking in a return to the land and in apparently simpler cultural formations, whether it be the commune or native life in faraway places, a refuge from a disappointing modernity signaled by the divorce of the parents. Such enthusiasts are clearly familiar to the history of American culture, an integral part of the myth of Protestant settlers in New England who left behind a corrupt Europe, exposed themselves to the wilderness, and sought to perfect a way of life for others to emulate. What is perhaps typical of this kind of utopianism is the need to move elsewhere, to search ceaselessly for what is lacking in one's surroundings, to value a simplicity that seems to exist solely in the mind. True to such needs, Ruth eventually leaves Gogol in the quest of a more perfect life elsewhere.

His second girlfriend, more serious than the first if only because she

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has taken full possession of Gogol as one might an adored object found at an out-of-the-way boutique, effortlessly and without doubt or resistance pulls him into the almost careless habits of her affluent, hypersophisticated lifestyle:

> "It's Maxine. From last night," she says, not bothering to apologize for waking him. She tells him she'd found his number in the phone book, though he doesn't remember telling her his last name. . . . Then, without awkwardness or pause, she invites him to dinner at her place. (129)

If Ruth represents utopian enthusiasm, Maxine, or Max as everyone calls her, represents the Anglo Protestant establishment. Contrary to self-contradictory claims made on behalf of this establishment, as recently articulated by Samuel Huntington for instance, it is, according to Lahiri, neither an indomitable rushing river into which all other cultural groups must learn to swim nor a beleaguered waterway on the verge of irreparable contamination. If Max's family is any indication, the Anglo Protestant establishment exerts its influence on American culture from a distance, at once removed from its conflicts and simultaneously irrelevant to it. From such a safe distance, immigrants from nonwhite countries are less likely to be threatening and more likely to be prized for the color they add to the scenery.

For those who make up this scenery, it can be difficult to determine which is more insulting: being seen as a threat or a prize. When Max's parents, a lawyer and a curator at the Metropolitan Museum, leave for the family summer seat in New Hampshire, Gogol stays behind with Max to inhabit an enormous brownstone in Chelsea, immersing himself in the benign neglect of an Anglo Protestant establishment. Despite the apparent freedom of this arrangement, Gogol can't help but feel the ways in which he has become assimilated into a way of life—by no means the dominant American way of life—that willingly makes room for him but only at the cost of leaving him feeling perpetually childlike, in need of tutoring, grateful for the opportunities he has been given, and handling objects that do not belong to him. "Now that it is just the two of them it seems to him," Lahiri writes, "more than ever, that they are living together. And yet for some reason it is dependence, not adulthood, he feels" (142). One can easily imagine how attractive and easy assimilation into such a life might be for Gogol, why he might find himself willing to turn his back,

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not without a little embarrassment, from the substantial but modest and slightly tacky materialism of his family's immigrant life. When Gogol visits his parents with Max for the first and only time, he imagines he sees his upbringing through her eyes:

> Once they get off at his parents' exit he senses that the landscape is foreign to her: the shopping plazas, the sprawling brick-faced public high school from which he and Sonia [his sister] graduated, the shingled houses, uncomfortably close to one another, on their grassy quarter-acre plots. The sign that says CHILDREN AT PLAY.[8] (146)

The road sign is almost too perfectly allegorical from Gogol's perspective, for this is how Max might characterize his family.

The third girlfriend hardly counts as one, since Bridget is merely a fling, a married woman with whom Gogol commits adultery out of idleness and boredom, his relationship with Max having fallen apart in the wake of his father's sudden death. What Bridget stands for, then, is "the spare and transient" quality of many relationships in the US that Gogol's mother so succinctly observed in the maternity ward while waiting to deliver him. This quality entails a constant mobility that does not allow for any kind of cultural formation to emerge: "They do not have each other's phone numbers. He does not know exactly where she lives. She always goes with him to his apartment. She never spends the night" (191). Bridget thus figures what both Ruth and Max cannot, a mainstream that operates as an absence, a lack of social connectedness and unique particularity that, as McGurl points out, quoting O'Conner, is the very kind of "anywhere or nowhere" that high cultural pluralism is meant to resist (120). If right, Bridget's brief presence in the novel is indicative of how difficult it is to assimilate into something that is impersonal and not meant to last.

In contrast to the unsatisfactory choices these three romantic partners embody, Gogol's fourth girlfriend and eventual wife signifies the ethnic alternative. Moushumi is, at least in Gogol's mind and certainly in the minds of his Bengali elders, the figure of allegiance to one's ethnos, the daughter of an old family friend with the right kind of background and an uncomplicated familiarity. But even as Gogol turns to her as if he were turning himself over to one of his own kind, an allegory of ethnic maintenance, he finds himself making a choice that is not a choice, a fulfillment of an expectation that is all too reminiscent of being a six-month-old

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infant made to face his destiny in the form of symbol-laden objects. "Still," he thinks when his mother makes all the plans for the wedding,

> it feels a little strange to be so uninvolved in his own wedding, and he is reminded of the many other celebrations in his life, all the birthdays and graduation parties his parents had thrown when he was growing up, in his honor, attended by his parents' friends, occasions from which he had always felt at a slight remove. (220)

No matter how adult his response, Gogol finds himself losing control. If what is left of the assimilation narrative has made him feel like a dependent, so has ethnic allegiance, an alternative that feels increasingly like no alternative whatsoever.

Moushumi is the first of the two to realize that one cannot remain fully satisfied inhabiting such a position, a safe resolution to a problem that is probably better not thought of as a problem, since resolution suggests completion, an end to struggle, a willful surrender of hard-won personal agencies. These qualities are the opposite of what Moushumi desires. She wants a feeling of release from expectation, a kind of liberation that post-war critical theorists have repeatedly found in the unraveling of the sign and in the embrace of a hard anti-identity position, a rebellion against meaning that sometimes seems the same as a rebellion against oppression. The turning away from expectation and from the demands of a futurity based on the necessity of perpetuating the past leads Moushumi repeatedly to the decision she made as a younger woman, an escape from being represented in a certain way and an embrace of a liberation that has become almost synonymous with sexual license:

> Immersing herself in a third language, a third culture, had been her refuge—she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind. It was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favor of one that had no claim whatsoever. . . . Suddenly it was easy, and after years of being convinced she would never have a lover she began to fall effortlessly into affairs. With no hesitation, she had allowed men to seduce her in cafés, in parks, while she gazed at paintings in museums. She gave herself openly, completely, not caring about the consequences. (214–15)

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Her willingness to be seduced, driven by the same impulse that led her to France, is viewed in this passage, and later when she falls into an adulterous affair with an old lover, as the opposite of allegory, a willful denial of social arrangements meant to reproduce the future as a copy of the present that is also a rejection of identity. When she plunges into bodily pleasures, she comes as close to a feeling of freedom as any she has ever known.

There are many, of course, who would be the first to cast stones at her for the sexual choices she makes, and in particular her choice to violate the conventions of marriage. It may be, as Laura Kipnis argues, that adultery feels like such a radical break for freedom exactly because there are so many who, at least publicly, demand allegiance to monogamy. Against the "welter of ideological, social, and juridical commandments" (321) that might bring down shame, recrimination, and moral condemnation on Moushumi for the sexual risks she takes, we should hold fast to the feeling of liberation she finds in the identity-abnegating arms of her lovers, appreciating it as a freedom—no matter how "momentary" (322)—that is elsewhere so cheaply sold as an expression of an empty political piety. This freedom, as Kipnis points out, might also be the affective germ of new social relations, "as-yet-unknown forms of gratification and fulfillment" (322). But as Gogol's own affair with a married woman helps recall, such countervaluations need to reckon with the fact that even this kind of freedom also has its limitations, not least because it can feel so much like a celebration of neoliberal individualism that would substantiate yet again the fantasmatic division between the openness of the West and the suffocating traditionalism of the Third World.

With this last pitfall in mind, I wish to make the point that the symbolism of the romantic choices Gogol and, eventually, Moushumi encounter reflects the simplifications of allegory, the reduction of experience to magic and enchantment that is attractive because it is not subtle and because it transforms the messiness, the uncertainty, the heart-pounding risks, the numerous disappointments, the painful lows, and the just-as-painful highs that are an abiding part of these characters' experiences into something safe. The power of allegory is thus found in its being able to bring an escaping meaning under a symbolic control in the same way that magical thinking fulfills a wish for power in the face of powerlessness. If I reach the door before I can count to ten, I will get the job I want. In the same way, if I marry a woman named Ruth, she will be faithful to me.

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Such forms of magical thinking recall Michel Foucault's comments on logophobia in his 1970 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, given at a moment in his career when he seemed to be looking ahead to his work on biopolitics:

> There is undoubtedly in our society, and I would not be surprised to see it in others, though taking different forms and modes, a profound logophobia, a sort of dumb fear of these events, of this mass of spoken things, of everything that could possibly be violence, discontinuous, querulous, disordered even and perilous in it, of the incessant, disorderly buzzing of discourse. (*Archeology* 228–29)

These comments help us to see how the conflict *The Namesake* narrates might arise from the tension between the expectation, on the one hand, that one will accept constraints on discourse, and on the other, the desire to refuse such magical thinking in favor of a present defined by a more unpredictable future, to open oneself up, in other words, to "that which gives rise to the chance series" (*Archaeology* 229) that has led us to where we are and to conceive of ourselves as who we are. How to occupy such a present, one self-reflexively aware of the accidental nature of the exteriority providing the conditions of our possibility, is, of course, a more difficult intellectual task than highlighting the operations of allegory when they are present, since—as *The Namesake*'s predecessors have abundantly demonstrated—any attempt to define such a present, to articulate it as a form of discourse, is itself already a form of allegory. At the same time, as the narrator of *The Namesake* reminds us, such a present cannot remain contained by allegory, for the "[t]hings that should never have happened, that seemed out of place and wrong, these were what prevailed, what endured, in the end" (287).

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The name of Gogol's father, Ashoke, means without sorrow. This seems fitting because he, more than any other character in the novel and certainly more than Gogol, seems most at ease with himself, at peace with the decisions he has made and the life he has chosen. He is also luckier than the other characters because he was able to choose the course of his own life rather than having to follow the path that was laid out for him.

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On a return trip from Jamshedpur to Calcutta, the train he was riding on suddenly derailed, and he was thrown partly out of a window. Only by chance do rescuers find him, and later, in his family home recovering from his extensive injuries, he thinks about a conversation he had with another passenger, now dead, who advised him to "see as much of the world as you can" (16). He soon decides to do exactly this, to apply for a fellowship to study engineering abroad and in this way to choose "another sort of future" (21) than the one imagined for him by his parents. Even though something obviously sorrowful has happened to him, a traumatic event that leaves him prostrate for months and limping ever after, he is without sorrow because the trauma freed him from the life that he would otherwise, unthinkingly, have assumed as his own. He is wounded but not attached to his wound.

The same cannot be said about Gogol, whose name carries the trace of this trauma but not the freedom it afforded his father. The book Ashoke was reading on the train, the pages of which fluttered in the wind and caught the attention of rescue workers on the verge of giving up, was Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat." When the formal name selected for his son by his mother is lost in the mail, never to be recovered, Ashoke decides to name his son after the author of the book that saved his life, giving him a formal name that was meant only to be a name used within the intimate circles of family and friends. This is a name Gogol dislikes because it makes him stand out too much, neither Anglo American nor Indian, and finally he chooses to change his name to Nikhil (a playful twist on his namesake's first name). For most of his life, then, Gogol has tried to distance himself from the name he was given and the story that is attached to it, enacting through the play of his name the struggle against allegory dramatized by his romantic choices and alluded to by the title of the novel. At the end of *The Namesake,* after his father has died and his mother is getting ready to move out of the house where he grew up, Gogol finds himself reading the copy of "The Overcoat" that his father had given to him as a present long before. Obviously, we are meant to consider what the significance of this novella is to the story of Gogol's life.

"The Overcoat" concerns one euphoniously named Akaky Akakievich, a clerk who wants nothing more than to make copies of official government documents by hand. Within his limited domain, he is the master of his reality, creating with his hands, word by word, the official

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world that others who receive his copies will have no choice but to accept. It is a reality of laws, conventions, formality, and symbols. These are as binding on the lives of the citizenry as the clothes they wear are defining of the physical reality of their bodily movements. This world of copies is upset when Akaky discovers that he must replace his threadbare coat. Carried away by a mercurial tailor met at a moment of drunken enthusiasm, Akaky is transported into an unpredictable exteriority of predatory social relations, criminal behavior, and bureaucratic power that negates any form of agency he may have possessed before. The world outside his own is scary, beyond his control, crushing in the obvious indifference with which it regards a nonpersonage like Akaky. The end suggests a supernatural turn as a necessary response to such irregularity, as Akaky haunts the "Person of Consequence" (560) whose behavior toward him in life has mortified him to death. In this way, Akaky extracts a small amount of vengeful justice from beyond the grave.

This work, which frames the narrative of *The Namesake* by setting it in motion and by providing its closing invocation, seems to capture the petty absurdity of the troubles that Gogol has with his name, the way in which he decides to have it changed legally to Nikhil only to find out, in a tearful exchange between father and son, why his father had originally given him the name he had. Like the tragedy of the lost overcoat, the miscommunication about his name seems enormous only to the individuals affected, just as the casual racism of an insignificant character like Pamela, met at a moment of forced socializing in New Hampshire, might seem painful to the one who must endure it:

> "I mean, you must never get sick."
> "Actually, that's not true," he says, slightly annoyed. . . .
> "But you're Indian," Pamela says, frowning. "I'd think the climate wouldn't affect you, given your heritage." (157)

And yet, as ordinary as the life is that Akaky has led before he is forced to buy a new overcoat, there is something about it that seems worth preserving, that deserves to be grieved when lost, and that requires justice against the personage who, enamored by his own importance, must inflate himself by demeaning another. In a similar way, it is difficult to dismiss the exchange between Gogol and Pamela too quickly. Pamela's casual racism reveals a deep-seated and all-too-often-met uncertainty over how the status of even the most privileged children of 1965 registers in

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the social settings they are coming to occupy. No matter how much they might wish to belong, they are marked as outsiders, a shadow of doubt that brings into slightly sharper relief the contradiction Gogol embodies at such moments. This contradiction is the one between the immigrant as threat to national security, what Mayor Guiliani's police commissioner invoked when he uttered the phrase "taxi terrorists" even before the events of September 11 (Mathew 35), and the immigrant as founding myth of the nation, one shored up by successive legislative refinements that carefully give preference to the immigration of specific kinds of professionals. If the select children of 1965 have found material and professional success, it is because the state has given them a firm biopolitical push. One of the most graphic examples of the contradiction created by this Janus-faced attitude toward immigration can be found in the fact that more

> people entered the United States as highly skilled workers in the fiscal year 2001 than in any year in American history, but more people also died that year in trying to enter the United States illegally than in any other year for which we have records. (Park and Park 3)

Those on the former side of this social equation might feel a lingering sense of uncertainty comparable to the one evoked by *The Namesake* as it turns its last chapter toward the future. There is an intense attention to form as the verb tense begins in the present, lapses back and forth to the past and to the future, until, by the very end, the future dominates. There is one moment in particular among this shuttling of tenses that stands out:

> The cool air is pleasant on his face after his hours on the train. He'd slept most of the journey to Boston, the conductor poking him awake once they'd reached South Station, and he was the only person left in the compartment, the last to get off. He had slept soundly, curled up on two seats, his book unread, using his overcoat as a blanket, pulled up to his chin. . . . He must help his mother pack her things, settle her accounts. They will drive her to Logan and see her off as far as airport security will allow. And then the house will be occupied by strangers, and there will be no trace that they were ever there, no house to enter, no name in the telephone directory. (281)

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The image of Gogol stepping off a train, where he has been cocooned reassuringly in his overcoat, lulled by the back-and-forth motion of his compartment, only to face the chill of the tasks that lie before him, is breathtaking, not least because it recalls the moment when Gogol's father nearly died in a train accident. It quietly evokes the futility of Gogol's travels as he returns along permanent tracks that he has traveled back and forth in the course of his story, never once, unlike his father, having veered into bodily catastrophe, yet always feeling, again unlike his father, somehow unfulfilled as a person, out of place, dislocated, directionless. Rail travel has been safe and dependable, requiring nothing of Gogol, entailing no risks. It suggests a stasis in motion that succinctly captures his predicament at this moment in a largely uneventful life circumscribed by the allegory of reproductive futurism—the felt need to go off in a direction of his own choosing, to imagine "another sort of future" without any clear idea of how he should do this. This is a predicament, it seems to me, that remains very much with us at a moment that cannot yet be said to have outgrown the crises, both of nation and ethnos, named by an earlier generation of postmodern authors.

Notes

1. McGurl is also deeply concerned with the way MFA programs wed creative writing to the corporate structure of the university. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this essay to pursue this point further.

2. In addition to the standard works by David Harvey (*The Condition of Postmodernity)* and Fredric Jameson (*Postmodernism*), Bill Readings's more recent account of how universities no longer serve an explicitly national project has become essential to conversations about these phenomena in literary studies. Michel Foucault's work has also figured with renewed vigor in these discussions, especially after the translation of *"Society Must Be Defended."*

3. These critiques of Mukherjee's fiction should be tempered by Srikanth's observation that

> Whatever her shortcomings, there is no denying that Mukherjee's vision is vast, that she sees the interconnectedness between nations and follows the repercussions of actions in one sphere of globe upon peoples in another. (185)

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4. This argument is not without controversy. See the forum on the antisocial thesis in queer theory published in Caserio et al., featuring pieces by Paul Caserio, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean. Muñoz's critique is especially sharp as he points out how Edelman's argument might squeeze out people of color from his definition of queerness, even if they themselves also identify as queer.

5. For an extended discussion of the model minority myth, see Palumbo-Liu (395–416). Regarding the 1965 Act and its impact on the changing demographics of the United States, see Reimers, Hing, Hollinger, Luibéid, Louie, and Park and Park. I wish to stress as well that even without the 1965 Act, large numbers of people from all over the world would probably still have migrated to the United States in the same ways that other industrialized countries have been forced to accept new arrivals. See Sassen 322.

6. I am not the first to highlight the importance of children in Lahiri's fiction. Michael Cox points out how in three of the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies,* children occupy center stage as "observers, untainted by the effects of prolonged enculturation" (120).

7. One might also think about allegory along the lines suggested by Frederic Jameson in the widely debated essay "Third-World Literature in the Age of Multinational Capitalism." But while Jameson excludes the West from the kinds of national allegories he finds being written in the Third World, I am insisting in this essay that such national allegories are very much a fixture of the postmodern/ethnic turn in contemporary American literature. For a searing critique of Jameson's essay, see Ahmad. For a discussion about the controversy surrounding Jameson's essay, see Szeman.

8. This is the only time I note the fact that Gogol has a sister. In this I am following the novel's almost exclusive preoccupation with its male protagonist. If I had more space and proper occasion, I would have liked to break out of this preoccupation to note at greater length the ways in which Sonia marries a Chinese American man at the end of the novel, suggesting another possible allegorical position between nation and ethnos not considered here.

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The Novel in a Time of Terror: *Middlesex*, History, and Contemporary American Fiction

Samuel Cohen

Jeffrey Eugenides's 2002 *Middlesex*, a critically acclaimed historical novel, has been praised as an expansive, epic portrait of the American twentieth century from its immigrant roots to the present.[1] It takes its readers from a Turkish village in the 1920s to the race riots of the late 1960s, following a Greek and then Greek American family across time and the world, spinning an interestingly twisted yarn in the voice of the family's latest product, whose gender identity, complicated by a genetically inherited hermaphroditism, is at the center of his story. The novel displays a particular historical imagination, as all historical novels do; it depends on a set of notions about the relationship between past, present, and future, about cause and effect, and about the possibilities and problems that attempts to understand and represent the past entail. And, as is also the case with all historical novels, its historical imagination can tell us something about the historical imagination of its times.

While it is no longer common in current critical discourse to discuss works in terms of aesthetic failure or success, I believe that *Middlesex* fails aesthetically and that it is important to talk about it in these terms because how it fails says something about its historical imagination and the historical imagination of its times. At the root of its failure, I'll argue, is the way it imposes a false closure on its narrative of the main character's gender crisis. This closure represents something other than a poor aesthetic choice. Rather, its falseness—the unearned, unwarranted character

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of the novel's ending—is unintended, and so it represents a failure that is especially indicative of the unconscious effect of its historical imagination. The way *Middlesex* ends is in part due to, and thus can tell us something about, the way history felt in America in 2002.

§

The formal phenomenon of closure is closely linked in the literature and thought of the second half of the twentieth century to the existential phenomenon of contingency. The felt relation of a time, a writer, or a particular kind of historical imagination to the fact of contingency informs the way stories are told, in particular the nature of their endings (and not just in the recent past, as Frank Kermode has shown). Postmodernism, though, has been especially invested in the connection between closure and contingency. In an early (1972) statement of postmodern doctrine made in the first issue of *boundary 2,* the postmodern journal he co-founded, William Spanos describes the relationship between closure and contingency after midcentury:

> Only after the existentialist philosophers revealed that the perception of the universe as a well-made fiction, obsessive to the Western consciousness, is in reality a self-deceptive effort to evade the anxiety of contingent existence by objectifying and taking hold of "it," did it become clear to the modern writer that the ending-as-solution is the literary agency of this evasive objectification. (152)

The distrust of closure is widely articulated in postmodern thought, early (as in statements by Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan, John Barth, et al.) and late (Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson, Brian McHale, et al.). The story that I will tell through my reading of *Middlesex,* however, is that of the changing nature of that distrust in recent years. What endings mean, and why writers embrace them or avoid them, depends in part on how contingent existence feels and how public discourse and constructions of history deal with that feeling. As a result, events that reawaken a sense of contingency and challenge already constructed narratives—in particular, historical traumas—can affect the shape of literary endings. This is especially the case, I will argue, for historical literature, work whose focus is explicitly on the past and always implicitly, as a result, on the way that

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history "ends"—on the way the past leads to the precarious present and, ultimately, the future. Thus, the way *Middlesex* ends should be understood in the context of what ends meant at the time.

§

During a ceremony held in Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1991, the fiftieth anniversary of the Japanese attack, President George Bush put the end of the Cold War into what he saw as its proper context: "Now we stand triumphant," he said, "for a third time this century, this time in the wake of the Cold War. As in 1919 and 1945, we face no enemy menacing our security" (qtd. in Engelhardt, "Victors" 214). The dissolution of the Soviet Union, for Bush, fit easily into the seamless narrative of America's history as world power. Looking back from this latest "victory," Bush saw a succession of victorious moments such as the one in which he now believed himself to be living.

American fiction of the 1990s reflects and reflects upon the historical imagination of its times. Much of the character of this imagination—of the ways people told stories about the past—is due to the event that began the decade, the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The 1990s saw not just the end of the international order of the last half-century but also, amid relative peace and prosperity, the fiftieth anniversaries of the events of the world war that preceded it—making for what Cold War historian Paul Boyer calls "the retrospective moment of 1995" (xviii)—and the end-of-an-era sense imparted by the close of a century and a millennium. As a result, the 1990s were a retrospective decade. This retrospection was evident in the number of cultural products that focused on the nation's past, from the increase in documentary films such as those by Ken Burns and the popularity of books by historians such as Stephen Ambrose and the ubiquitous Doris Kearns Goodwin to war movies such as *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Thin Red Line*, and *Pearl Harbor*, the launch of the History Channel and the growth of the *Biography* series, CNN's 1998 24-part history of the Cold War, the miniseries *The Sixties*, and decade-specific revivals in popular music and television such as *That Seventies Show*.[2]

But the end of the Cold War was especially encouraging (as many elements of the list above demonstrate) of the specific kind of historical narrative exemplified by Bush's 1991 speech—namely, the triumphalist: a long-running story of an always righteous, always victorious (or if not

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victorious, then unjustly handicapped) nation. This is a way of telling American history older than the nation itself, born when early European settlers saw themselves as new American Adams and their adventure in the New World as divinely protected, their victory assured, their success an example—"a city on a hill."[3] The end of the Cold War fit nicely into this story for many, confirming the superiority of capitalism and liberal democracy, confirming the idea that history made sense and the West was its winner—and for some like Francis Fukuyama, even showing that the world had reached the end of history, insofar as history was driven by ideological struggle. This reading of events helped strengthen the cowboys-and-Indians, "morning in America" sense of the nation that Ronald Reagan championed in the 1980s as a counter to what he perceived as the pessimism of the 1970s.

For some, the events of September 11, 2001, posed surprisingly little challenge to the triumphalist narrative reinvigorated by the end of the Cold War. Instead, it was seen to introduce a new enemy to the West's superior way of life in the amorphous and shape-shifting form of Terror (or Al Qaeda, or Islamic Fundamentalism, or, in a leaden summer 2005 test balloon, Extremism). Just as in the early 1990s many Cold Warriors found a new fight in the Culture Wars, seeing the American Left as the greatest threat to America, many Cold and Culture Warriors found a new fight after 9/11.[4] But for others, awareness of other kinds of narratives was encouraged by 9/11. From many of the subsequent reactions of the US government, including military action, there emerged a story of divergence from righteousness, not to mention victory. Bush the father's characterization of America as without enemies threatening our shores did not describe the state of the nation under the son's administration; the present moment did not, for many, fit into the father's triumphalist narrative. In addition to this resistance to a continuation of post–Cold War triumphalism in the triumphalist response to Terror, there also emerged a story about a different kind of terror—the terror caused by the recognition of contingency. This recognition informs a view of the course of human events as not chartable along the upward line of humankind's inexorable progress toward liberal democracy but rather as heavily featuring randomness and vulnerability.

Many acclaimed American literary novels of the 1990s reflected the history-mindedness of the decade; a good number of them could be seen as reactions to the triumphalist interpretation of the end of the Cold War,

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which took the collapse of the Soviet Union under its own weight for US victory over Reagan's "Evil Empire." Some examples are Tim O'Brien's 1994 *In the Lake of the Woods*, Joan Didion's 1996 *The Last Thing He Wanted*, and Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, and Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, all 1997. Each of these historical novels tells a story about individual characters whose lives are deeply affected by historical forces, and in doing so each explores the ways in which Americans have constructed their historical narratives on the triumphalist template. Taken together, they refute both Fredric Jameson's dismissal of postmodern historical novels as inevitably doomed failures (because ours is, in his words, "an age that has forgotten how to think historically" [*Postmodernism* ix]) and Walter Benn Michaels's negative take on the historical character of most contemporary novels, which he calls "posthistoricist" (26) following Fukuyama, and which he claims are identitarian rather than being concerned with either ideas or the past.[5] And they indicate a further development in the nature of the contemporary novel's attention to history, which, as Linda Hutcheon argued in 1988, had succeeded Joyce's paradigmatically modernist sense of history as a "nightmare" (34).[6] The turn to history in the 1990s, then, is not new, but it may be different.

One significant way in which this turn is different is in the nature of its response to triumphalist history. Another thread of stories that the nation has told itself about itself, probably for as long as it has told the triumphalist one, includes events and facts that are concerned with loss and wrongdoing: what James Berger describes as "the actual and evident imperfections of American history—slavery and its legacies, the violent injustices committed against Native Americans, the war in Vietnam" (134). These facts would disrupt the triumphalist narrative, so they are often elided or interpreted in such a way as to minimize the disruption. In the latter years of the twentieth century, however, counternarratives constructed around these facts gained greater currency.[7] One factor producing this trend is the development and spread of the notion of historical trauma. In light of this notion, the opposed narrative of the American past and present can be thought of, following Berger's formulation, as the traumatic.[8]

Freud borrowed *trauma*, the Greek word for wound, to name the phenomenon of a shocking event that proves unassimilable to conscious-

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ness, gets repressed or lost in memory, and presents itself symptomatically in various disruptive ways unless brought to the surface and confronted.[9] The idea of trauma did not apply only to the personal experience of violent or violating events. It also came to be seen as a useful tool for thinking about the collective experience of historical catastrophes, events that occur on a mass scale or receive wide public attention (and so have widespread effects, both immediate and dispersed in space and time), events that are hard to assimilate into memory and understanding and so are elided or effaced in collective memory (and as a result have effects that are further dispersed). People working in this field in psychology and literary and historical studies have found Freud's language and concepts, such as acting out, repetition, and working through, helpful for thinking about national narratives and behaviors.[10]

The adoption of the trauma model for national narratives has been motivated in part by the sense that there have been and continue to be disastrous consequences when historical narratives leave out certain kinds of events or ignore their importance. As Berger, Dominick LaCapra, and others have argued, however, relying on the medical model inherited from Freud can make the traumatic narrative too quick to heal the wounds it uncovers. It's my belief that one cause of this shortcoming in some trauma narratives may be the same as that which revitalized the triumphalist narrative in the 1980s and 1990s—namely, the end of the Cold War, which provided a model of narrative closure difficult to resist. A history whose tragic losses and dark secrets can be uncovered and healed is not as opposed as it might seem to a history in which those things stay hidden, a history that's all about victory and righteousness, a history where everything turns out all right for America in the end. The events of 9/11, which some have found a fit for a narrative of America as innocent victim (and then righteous avenger), have been for others a model of an open wound that needs healing—or closing.

In just this way, Eugenides's *Middlesex* imposes healing closure on what begins as a more open-ended story. Through the magic of eliding and forgetting, *Middlesex* makes things, even traumatic things, turn out all right in the end. The desire for closure at the heart of the historical vision of *Middlesex*, I believe, is common to many aspects of American culture after 9/11.

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Middlesex is a long historical yarn spun by Cal Stephanides, an American of Greek descent born to first-generation Greek American parents, who pass down to him a rare genetic mutation that results in his being raised as Calliope. His hermaphroditism goes undiscovered until his teens. Before the discovery, he leads a mostly happy life as a girl; after the discovery, he decides against the surgery his doctor proposes to make his body conform to his rearing, and he cuts his hair and begins to live as a boy. We are told this story by Cal more than two decades after his decision, in the very detailed context of another story spanning three generations and two continents. This larger story is held together not just by the thread of Cal's genealogy (tangled, as it were, by a number of incestuous pairings) but also of his genetics: the mutation responsible for his hermaphroditism is in some sense the hero of this story, what the narrator calls "this rollercoaster ride of a single gene through time," as it survives atrocity, displacement, and war (2).

In the telling of this story, *Middlesex* sets itself up to make a brief for free will against the determining effects of both biology and society. Eugenides's handling of the gender issue, however, undercuts this brief because he resolves his hero's conflict too quickly and too neatly. Calliope decides he is a boy, cuts off the ends of his name and his hair, and because he decides it, readers seem meant to accept it. This exercise of free will, however, strains plausibility. While there is some acknowledgment of the difficulty entailed in changing one's gender identification and presentation, and a small part of the novel details Cal's immediate post-Callie life, this section of the novel is rushed and haphazardly plotted, and the ideas that animate the story earlier are lost. The questions raised in the book thus do not survive the novel's paired resolutions, Calliope's decision in the mid-1970s and the beginning of Cal's first real romantic relationship with a woman, which is made possible by his 2001/2002 telling of the story of his past. While there is much to be said about the novel's treatment of gender and sexuality, what I will focus on here is the fact that its exploration of these issues and the part they play in its hero's life is foreclosed.

Middlesex opens: "I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960, and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petroskey, Michigan, in August of 1974."

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On the next page, after this unconventional twist on a conventional bildungsroman beginning, another generic side of the book is introduced with the phrase, "Three months before I was born." While telling the story of the family situation immediately prior to the main character's birth is not unusual for a bildungsroman, what is initiated here is a plunge backward into a family history that occupies almost the first half of the novel. This story is played out against a backdrop of historical events and settings such as the 1922 Turkish massacre of Greeks at Smyrna, Prohibition, Henry Ford era Detroit, and the 1967 Detroit riots. And while *Middlesex* does tell a family story over several generations, it wants to be more than family saga: it intends to engage national history, showing not just a family across time but a family buffeted by historical change.

Because of its present-day frame, *Middlesex* might not appear to be a historical novel. Eugenides himself doesn't identify it as such; he has said, "it was not conceived as a historical novel. I always think a historical novel continuously remains in the past. This book tries to explain the past and comes up to the present day" (Interview). While the historical novel need not be set in the past entirely or at all, at least according to Lukács's claims for the novel after Balzac,[11] what is more important here is that *Middlesex* does not exactly come up to the present. Its main action is split between the Stephanides family history, which runs from the early 1920s to the late 1950s, and the life of its narrator from birth until the mid-1970s. Its present-time frame, set in the early years of the twenty-first century, contains the quasi-metafictional story of the narrator's writing of these other two stories—of the novel *Middlesex,* or most of it—and the concurrent story of his courtship of Julie. But there is a quarter-century gap between the end of the story our narrator tells of his past and the present of the frame. This gap provides a clue, I believe, to the specific nature of this novel's historical imagination.

The gap is not important because it establishes that the novel is set safely in the past and so really is a historical novel. Nor is it important because it highlights what for many postmodern historical novels has become a staple: the recognition that present concerns impinge on reconstructions of the past. The "truth" of past events is not just ultimately uncapturable, these novels assume, but attempts to capture it are always colored by present-day needs. The present-day frame of *Middlesex* is enough to point that out even without the gap: Cal needs to tell the story of his past in order to function in the present, as his happy second-

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chance reunion with Julie at the end of the novel illustrates. The narrator's frequent metafictional admissions that he is taking liberties as he writes a fiction "based on real events," as they say in the police procedurals, reinforce this truth. His history of himself is motivated by particular concerns, as are all histories.

The central importance of the gap for understanding the novel's historical sense lies instead in the nature of the historical events that take place during it. Historical events of the years that *are* narrated by Cal are crucial to the story of the Stephanides family. The immigrant experience of the family; the impact of the Detroit riots on their fortunes; the national malaise, felt before Jimmy Carter named it—their lives in America are touched by historical convulsions and shifts in mood. Very early in the novel, the narrator discusses his father's faith in his ability to influence his planned child's gender through carefully timed conception:

> I can only explain the scientific mania that overtook my father during the spring of '59 as a symptom of the belief in progress that was infecting everyone back then. Remember, *Sputnik* had been launched only two years earlier. Polio, which had kept my parents quarantined indoors during the summers of their childhood, had been conquered by the Salk vaccine. . . . In that optimistic, postwar America, which I caught the tail end of, everybody was the master of his own destiny, so it only followed that my father would try to be the master of his. (9–10)

Milton Stephanides lived in an America that seemed able to exercise its will freely and so encouraged individuals (some, anyway, as the section on the riots points out) to think they could successfully exercise their own. His story, however, is told in a different time, after Watergate and the loss in Vietnam, during an economic crisis in which America's dependence on Middle East oil illustrated the distance between its self-sufficient superpower dreams and the world's interdependent reality. At the end of the late chapter in which his father's death is retold, Eugenides writes:

> Milton got out before many of the things that I will not include in this story, because they are the common tragedies of American life, and as such do not fit into this singular and uncommon record. He got out before the Cold War ended, before missile

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> shields and global warming and September 11 and a second President with only one vowel in his name. (512)

Eugenides is careful at these crucial points of his novel, the beginning and the end, to highlight national events and reflect on national moods, and so to alert readers to the connections between these factors and his characters' stories. As Milton got out before the events of the last 30 years, though, so too does *Middlesex,* raising the question of the elided history's connection to the narrator's present. Between 1975 and 2002, a number of events occurred that were important to America's identity and sense of place in the world, including not just the events of the 1970s but also the heating up of the Cold War, in rhetoric and in Afghanistan and Central and South America, the end of the Cold War, and the events of September 11. In other words, the influence of the significant historical "things" that happen between Cal's return home on the occasion of his father's death and his telling of his story—especially, in my view, the fall of the Wall and the fall of the Towers—must inform the way he tells it. But the book won't tell us how.

§

One way to think about this novel's relation to history is to examine its imagination of the future, and to do so with reference to the concept of the future anterior as developed mainly by Derrida and also, somewhat differently, by Lacan and Lyotard. Derrida first uses this unusual verb tense in the exergue to *Of Grammatology* for the sense of time it opens up to think about speech acts and writing, the interpretation of literature, and the construction of history:

> The future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, *presented,* as a sort of monstrosity. For that future world and for that within it which will have put into question the values of sign, word, and writing, for that which guides our future anterior, there is as yet no exergue. (5)

Derrida is here proposing that this dangerous monstrosity is nonetheless a positive possibility; he calls it "a way of thinking that is faithful and at-

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tentive to the ineluctable world of the future which proclaims itself at present, beyond the closure of knowledge" (4).

Of the Derridean future anterior, Tony Thwaites writes:

> Grammatically, the "will have been" of the future anterior is not at all a matter of "a future determined by what preceded it": that would be a possible—but certainly not even then a necessary—use of the simple future, the "will be." The future anterior is a much stranger tense, of a future which has not yet arrived and is itself yet to be determined, but which determines retrospectively, in its turn, the past which *will have been* for that future. Invoking a past which has itself not yet arrived, or is always in the process of arriving, the future anterior not only describes the empirical delays attendant on any historicity, but also, in its complex textual folding, the very structure of historicity as perpetually renewed wager. (par. 12h)

The future anterior's "that which will have been" points to the past that will only exist once the future arrives. Lyotard and Lacan both adopted it because they wanted to make use of its counterintuitive yet (or, and so) revealing sense of the passage of time, Lacan for the light it can shed on the psyche, Lyotard for his construction of cultural history, in particular of the postmodern. Lyotard defines the postmodern as what happens when "The artist and the writer . . . are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*" (81). Lacan describes the future anterior this way: "What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming" (63). In both cases, we are, as in Derrida, beyond the closure of knowledge.

In his 1976 lecture "Declarations of Independence," Derrida makes use of his concept of the future anterior when he considers the American Declaration of Independence as an example of the dual power of language to describe and perform: it is "both a *description*, by its representatives, of the prior fact of the American people and their representatives and the very *performance* of this people and its representative signatories" (Beardsworth par. 6). This performance, Derrida says, is an act of invention, carried out through what he calls a "fabulous retroactivity" by which the American people claim to be a people before they have become

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one—looking back from the future, it is claimed, they *will have become* a people (*Negotiations* 50). The future anterior here resides especially, for Derrida, in this passage:

> We therefore the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by the authority of the good people of these Colonies, solemnly declare and publish that these United Colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent states.

The last line conveys the sense of description of the present and desire for the future: the colonies "are" free and also "of right ought to be" free. Saying it, in a sense, made it so, in that saying it was so enabled action based on the idea that it would be so.

Cal's moment of self-determination—the moment when he turns his back on his past and proclaims himself male—is a moment that depends on the future anterior. So too does that moment's twin at the end of the novel, when Cal has reached the end of the retelling of the story of his youth and is at the beginning of a relationship with Julie, a relationship that after a false start earlier in the novel now promises to last because Cal has worked through the traumas of the past. These two moments belong to the future anterior because they are constructions of history—Cal's personal history—that claim to describe a present but really construct a past built upon a wish for the future. Though Callie becomes Cal when she tells her mother and father (in writing) that she is a boy, she is a boy only because she decides to reject her rearing and selectively interpret her ambiguous physiognomy. She cuts her hair, walks like a boy, and names herself with a boy's name. In the moment that she declares herself male, she begins the process of constructing a history of her life that leads up to the present she imagines for herself. We see the future anterior in Cal's response to his mother's question "Don't you think it would have been easier just to stay the way you were?": "This is the way I was" (520). Likewise, Cal's intimation at the end of the novel that he has begun a sustainable relationship—that he has come to grips with who he is through the telling of his life story and as a result is able in the present to lead a healthy, shared life—is really a statement less of fact than of hope. And it similarly constructs a past that in the future, it is hoped, will be seen to

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have prepared the way for present happiness confirmed by future happiness.

If that future is happy. Whether the future will be happy is, in all cases, unknowable, because of the contingent nature of existence. What the idea of the future anterior reminds us is that we do not simply write our histories so that they lead happily to the present in which we find ourselves. That present, in actuality, is similarly unknowable, so we try to see the past leading to how we hope the present will turn out—in the future. As Tony Jackson has remarked concerning the future anterior as it appears in Lacan,

> Is it possible to think of ourselves absolutely now, exclusive of some expected direction into the future? So the sense of now emerges from a sense towards the yet to be. So when we recall the past, we are actually projecting, of course upon some more or less noumenal core of the real, an image of what will need to have been in order to bring about who we expect to be.

The book Cal writes tells the story of who he needs to have been in order to bring about the well-adjusted, happy man he expects to be but certainly does not know he will be. The book Eugenides writes does not seem to question Cal's shaping of his narrative; there is no detectable ironic distance between the two.

Cal's too quick, too neat resolution of his gender story and of the issue of hermaphroditism is, then, *Middlesex*'s own, and it is the result of its historical imagination, one that falls prey to the anxieties attendant on our living, to use Frank Kermode's phrase, in "the middest" (7), unable to know the future and often unwilling to deal with the traumatic past—or too willing to tell its story and declare its wounds healed. The ending is rushed, especially for a 500-plus page novel, and simplistic; it happens very quickly, and insists too much on its not being such a big deal: "After I returned from San Francisco and started living as a male, my family found that, contrary to popular opinion, gender was not all that important. My change from girl to boy was far less dramatic than the distance anybody travels from infancy to adulthood" (250). However, this girl-becomes-boy bildungsroman *does* portray a change more dramatic than adolescence, and often seems to know it, as in its fleeting recognitions of Cal's difficulties in San Francisco, including getting beaten up in Golden Gate Park and working as Hermaphroditus in an underwater

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peep show. But it downplays the significance of this change.[12] And it is followed by plot machinations that creak and grind, often implausibly, as in the scheme engineered by Cal's priest uncle (and one-time spurned suitor of his mother) to fake Calliope's kidnapping after she runs off to become Cal, and her father's resulting death in, of all things, a car chase. On a bridge. And it oversimplifies what had been a complex and nuanced exploration of what makes gender and of the history both of the argument between nature and nurture and also of the ways medicine has dealt with hermaphroditism. In the end, the "middle" of its title, which it had so promisingly staked out as its territory early on, is abandoned.

Just as Cal's autobiography and Eugenides's novel tell stories of the past built on the image of a desired yet-to-be, so Americans, ever since before the Declaration, have been telling stories of their national past built on what they believe their nation to be at present, which itself has been only what they have hoped for its future. The telling of these stories requires that the traumas of the past either be elided or confronted. The danger of the confrontation, again, lies in its emphasis on working through. Motivated in cases of historical trauma by a desire to uncover past losses or atrocities that have been elided, the remembering of which is thought to have potential future value not just in national healing but in directing future action, working through can be performed in such a way that the useful historical reminder is dealt with and then put away. The traumatized subject is able, on this view, to domesticate the past through an exercise of free will, to escape its power to determine the future—as *Middlesex* believes Cal does. The problem is that, with the reforgetting of the traumatic event, its potential to remind is lost. Healing the wound, on this view, might be less valuable than leaving it open. But the need to imagine a happy future is powerful, and the constructions of the past that result can seek what might be called closure in their future-oriented motivation: whether the past is seen as free of trauma or full of it, the result can be a view of the past as a closed book, as that which leads to the happy ending that is the present.

§

As I've suggested, the trauma that announced the end of the 1990s occurred in September 2001. American optimism and faith in self-determination, in the ability to write one's own destiny, was shaken by these

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attacks, so unforeseen and close to home.[13] The happy future assumed to be around the bend after the US found itself the only superpower was harder to assume in such a radically contingent-feeling present; the history that needed to be written to lead from the past to that happy future was going to be hard to write.

But again, people are eager to heal their wounds. The trauma of 9/11 provoked repression, vengefulness, and self-recrimination; most reactions save the last were eager to move past it or use it as motivation for military action. The closure such thinking provides is far more comforting than the alternatives. The attempt to deny the anxiety of contingency that is central to triumphalist narrative—as well as to a traumatic narrative too keen on healing—enables reconstructions of the past that lead to rosy futures, right past uncertain presents. This kind of historical imagination drives *Middlesex*. Eugenides's description of the book as explaining the past and coming up to the present reveals a desire for a past whose traumas can be healed over (in this case, by the working through that literary representation, a kind of written talking-cure, seems to offer) and can be shown to have made possible a happy future. "History is what hurts," Jameson wrote 25 years ago (*Political Unconscious* 102); history, for Jameson, is an absent cause that can only be seen in its limiting effects. For Eugenides and other contemporary novelists influenced by the strain of trauma thinking too keen on closure, history is what *heals:* it is marked by deeply wounding limit events, whose hurts are healed through narrative.

Seeing history as something to be healed has an effect on how one represents it. In the case of *Middlesex,* it has formal effects that identify it not simply as a postmodern historical novel but as a post-9/11 historical novel. At one point in his account of his early life, Cal writes:

> Aside from their blinding brightness, there was another odd thing about Milton's home movies: like Hitchcock, he always appeared in them. The only way to check the amount of film left in the camera was by reading the counter inside the lens. In the middle of Christmas scenes or birthday parties there always came a moment when Milton's eye would fill the screen. So that now, as I quickly try to sketch my early years, what comes back most quickly is just that: the brown orb of my father's sleepy, bearish eye. A postmodern touch in our domestic cinema, pointing up artifice, calling attention to mechanics. (And bequeathing me my aesthetic). (225)

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The metafictional touches in *Middlesex* are there to remind us that a creative intelligence is behind its construction of history. As much postmodern fiction has shown, there is always an eye behind the viewfinder and a hand pointing the lens. As the contemporary history of these techniques enters another century, though, the early connections between postmodern techniques and radical epistemological skepticism are less clear. As Hutcheon puts it in her discussion of what she calls the "historiographic metafiction" of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, "Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (110).[14] Many writers in the last 10 or 15 years have used metafictional techniques popularized by earlier novelists, and while the meanings of formal choices are always hard to pin down, it can be safely said that the radical tang of metafictional technique is not always what it once was.

Nor is it always intended to be. Eugenides does not feel that he is a postmodernist, though Cal claims postmodernism as his own aesthetic and Eugenides himself sees aspects of it in his work. In the interview with Bram van Moorhem he remarks on *Middlesex*'s combination of self-conscious narration and traditional novelistic storytelling, and then makes clear that this does not make him postmodern:

> I don't want to constantly frustrate the reader by taking him down on dead-ends, at the dead-end of literature or something—that doesn't interest me. I want, in a way, a Classical shape to my books and a pleasing and elegant form to them, which is old-fashioned. But within that, I still have a lot of postmodern play without the continuing sense of relativism that . . . I got so tired of.

One of the dead ends of postmodern play that Eugenides is tired of concerns the literal end—the problematization of closure. While he enjoys the calling attention to mechanics, the pointing up of artifice, he favors what he calls classical shape and elegant form—things surely characterized by clean endings. But as I have argued, the choice to end or not to end has meaning. Again, the distrust of closure so closely identified with postmodernism is a response to the existential confrontation with contingency brought on by the horrors of mid-century; one formal aspect of that response is a refusal of closure, a radical open-endedness. In

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contemporary fiction, especially fiction written after the end of the Cold War, that distrust is often specifically informed by the resurgence of the triumphalist narrative inspired by what is taken as American victory; the formal response often takes the shape of reopenings of historical narratives previously closed, in particular unearthings of repressed pasts. This response can sometimes result in an inadvertent repetition of the very failing that inspired it in the first place—the welcoming of closure in the form of the healing that is working through's goal, which manifests itself in the hasty, foreclosing, elision-enabled ending. *Middlesex* further suggests that this repetition of the compulsion toward closure modeled by the end-of-history claims following the end of the Cold War is in recent years intensified by the desire to heal the new wound of 9/11. In the end, Eugenides's novel is chock full of closure. And this closure is not simply a formal tying up of loose ends but also foreclosure: the meaning of the ambiguity of Cal's body, the undecided relative importance of different determining forces on the question of his gender, the ramifications of his choice to exercise his free will—these issues are dropped. The attempt to evade contingency that early theorists of postmodern fiction saw in traditional novel endings is also evident in this sometimes postmodern-seeming novel, but it is evident in a way that is specific to its historical imagination, an imagination itself shaped by its historical context.

Writing a historical novel that asserts the possibility of self-determination after 9/11 can be seen as making a certain kind of sense. A reassertion of American optimism in this context is the understandable result both of the old American ability to construct, from a hoped-for future, a past that leads to it, and also of the contemporary American tendency, especially prevalent after 9/11, to read the hurts of history as available for healing. It is, in the end, an attempt to achieve closure. This closure allows the past to be constructed optimistically, as it is when Eugenides ends his novel with young Cal standing in the doorway of his childhood home, losing track of time, weeping for his father and his past but looking outward and "thinking about what was next"; of course, this optimism relies on the teller's already knowing what is next (as we do, from the frame story). Such construction, as I've tried to suggest in the case of *Middlesex*, can be inadequate. A more useful if less comforting alternative is suggested by Derrida in a dialogue in the 2003 *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, where he argues that the world will be traumatized by 9/11

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> not in the present or from the memory of what will have been the past present . . . [but] from the unrepresentable future, from the open threat of an aggression capable one day of striking—for you never know—the *head* of the sovereign state par excellence. (Borradori 98)

The significance of the event here is in the awareness of contingency it brings and in the resistance to healing closure it encourages. The medical model, which sometimes leads trauma theory to uncritically valorize working through, might be the wrong one here. Instead, perhaps especially in light of the figure of autoimmunity that Derrida develops in this dialogue and elsewhere to discuss what he sees as empire's death drive, it might be more useful to mind not the event of wounding but rather the self-wounding repetitions, such as elective war or domestic surveillance. At a time when what will come next seems increasingly unimaginable, American stories that acknowledge the terror of the future and resist imposing closure on the past are becoming increasingly important.

Writing the kind of novel that Eugenides wrote after 9/11 does not only make a certain kind of sense, it may also characterize a moment in literary history after postmodernism. If I'm right that the nature of the distrust of closure changes after the end of the Cold War, and that this modulation of postmodernism's distrust is further spun by the events of 9/11, then the formal evidence offered by *Middlesex* can help point to one defining characteristic of a new moment in American fiction, one in which the stakes of the decision of whether or not to end the old-fashioned way are raised. How high they are raised, and what shape historical narratives will take, only the future, of course, will tell.

Notes

1. It has also, at the time of this writing, just been named a selection for Oprah's Book Club, prompting a new printing of 750,000 copies ("Oprah").

2. For more on the historical orientation of the 1990s, see Boyer.

3. John Winthrop's phrase, from his sermon "A Modell of Christian Charity" (47). For the American Adam, see Lewis.

4. Todd Gitlin, describing this vacuum and the resulting turn, called it "an enemy crisis" (80); Pat Buchanan called it "a religious war . . . for the soul of America."

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5. Michaels actually labels Morrison's approach to history "posthistoricist historicism" (140). While it is true that many of the same writers wrote historical novels earlier in their careers (for example Morrison's *Beloved* [1987], DeLillo's *Libra* [1988], and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* [1973]), I argue that in many cases the novels of the 1990s represent turns to an explicit self-reflexiveness that enables a questioning and revision of their own past readings of history as expressed in their earlier novels.

6. Hutcheon writes: "There seems to be a new desire to think historically, and to think historically these days is to think critically and contextually" (88).

7. Tom Engelhardt argues in *The End of Victory Culture* that the hold of the triumphalist narrative on the culture began to weaken before the 1990s, and even before the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the war in Vietnam. It began, he contends, with our dropping of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Victory was not at issue then, but our innocence and rightness were.

8. The idea of trauma can help explain the apparent necessity of forgetting or erasing certain elements of the national past. Berger applies this idea in his analysis of postapocalyptic thought in American literature, film, and public discourse through the 1980s. For more about triumphalism, trauma, and the end of the Cold War, see my essay "Triumph and Trauma."

9. The career of trauma in Freud's thought took a number of turns. Over the course of his work on this notion—from his early *Studies in Hysteria* to the important mid-career *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the late *Moses and Monotheism*—Freud struggled with how much importance the traumatic event should have in explaining neuroses. In each of these books he first assigned it primary causal force and then swung back to the drives or some other internal or organic factor. Berger summarizes:

> All Freud's thinking on trauma manifests this ambivalence regarding the significance of the historical event. Reading Freud, we are tempted to ask, are there events, are there traumas at all? That is, do events in history have consequences—as Freud urges in the first movements of each of his theoretical ventures—or, as he concludes in each of his second movements, are events secondary to desire, instinct, or a form of genetic history? (23)

Despite this ambivalence (though it provides an intriguing parallel for thinking about poststructural thought's own ambivalence regarding the event), Freud's focus on the mechanism of how the psyche deals with the extreme or limit event gave birth to modern trauma studies in the late 1980s and 1990s. Attendant at this birth were: Holocaust studies; the medical institutionalization of post-traumatic stress disorder with the 1980 appearance of *DSM-III* (the third

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edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the main diagnostic reference published by the American Psychiatric Association), which grew out of work with soldiers returned from Vietnam, just as Freud's work on trauma in the 1920s grew out of his treatment of soldiers returned from the First World War; a popular and legal fascination with repressed memory in the 1980s; and the catastrophe-heavy twentieth century, which saw genocides, ethnic cleansing, world wars, and the use of the atom bomb.

10. See Berger; Caruth, *Trauma* and *Unclaimed Experience*; LaCapra; Herman; Felman and Laub; and Leys.

11. Lukács writes:

> This continuation of the historical novel, in the sense of a consciously historical conception of the present, is the great achievement of . . . Balzac. . . . Balzac passes from the portrayal of *past history* to the portrayal of the *present as history*. (81, 83)

12. One interesting take on this aspect of the novel, and more generally on the essentialism of Eugenides's portrayal of gender and sexuality, can be found in Daniel Mendelsohn's review.

13. As John Lewis Gaddis wrote,

> Except for Pearl Harbor and a few isolated pinpricks like Japanese attempts to start forest fires with incendiary bombs in the Pacific Northwest in 1944 and 1945, or the Mexican guerilla Pancho Villa's raid on Columbus, N.M., in 1916, the United States has suffered no foreign attack on its soil since British troops captured Washington and burned the White House and the Capitol in 1814. . . . Everybody has airplanes, and everything that lies below them must now be considered a potential target. (B7)

14. For recent revaluations of Hutcheon's ideas about contemporary historical fiction, see Amy Elias, who inserts a new term, "metahistorical romance" (2), into the discussion, and Marcel Cornis-Pope, who lauds what he perceives as a turn to politics after a series of essentially formalist books on postmodernism.

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Reviews

How to Do Things with Novels

Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel
by Lisa Zunshine
Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006. 198 pages

Ellen Spolsky

The title of Lisa Zunshine's new book reminds me of J. L. Austin's title *How to Do Things with Words.* Like Austin, Zunshine promises a straightforward approach, as if to say: "Relax and listen to some straight talk about a topic others have overcomplicated." Zunshine implies that her job is to discuss the simple truth that real readers naturally like good stories. It's hard to argue with her as I write this review in the week after the final Harry Potter book was released and sold 2,652,656 copies in the first 24 hours *(Guardian Unlimited).*

Zunshine thus seems to promise her readers—primarily students of literature and secondarily experienced academic readers and the general reading public—that they will not be asked to struggle with unfamiliar scientific terms or radical ideas but will be rewarded with an interesting answer to the old question of why we like to read fiction. She delivers what she promises and, like Austin, opens the way for continued exploration of the topic. Although her analyses of texts emerge out of her own close encounter with contemporary cognitive science and evolutionary psychology, her discussion of empirical data from these fields is usually described as suggestive. Claims for the existence of mind as a neurological capacity, or even as a brain module, like vision or hearing, are offered in *Why We Read Fiction* but are subordinated to examples of how useful it is. The proofs of the approach will come not from outside of the literary experience but from the readers' own sense that it does indeed describe the way understanding in life and in literature feels. The Theory of Mind itself, or ToM, the theoretical scaffolding of this study, offers a way of talking about the ability to mind read—that is, to infer the internal states of mind of others by observing their behavior. Considering readers' interac-

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tions with literary texts from this new perspective not only offers a new vocabulary for something we've always done—search out and explore the beliefs and motives of characters—but also allows some new speculation about why people everywhere like reading or hearing stories, and always have. Although I can only hint at it here, I believe this new approach to reading literary texts adds significantly to what we have already learned about language use from Austin.

Like Austin's book, which is a record of spoken lectures, *Why We Read Fiction* is a written version of talks and classroom presentations in which the speaking voice is rarely muffled. Zunshine's voice is that of a generous and self-effacing teacher who summarizes the scene being analyzed for you, introduces new terms with homely examples, and belittles herself rather than condescend. The book's first sentence is: "Let me begin with a seemingly nonsensical question," and its second-to-last makes a claim she labels "modest," although it is hardly that. As with Austin's book, the disparaging wink at academic theorizing suggested by the title is disingenuous. The questions about language use and about the human love of stories may be simple, but answering them, for both authors, involves making significant theoretical proposals about the structure of the context of language use and about the best way to account for the human ability to distinguish the more from the less relevant contextual information and to understand our own position in a web of interpersonal relationships.

The modesty of the book's rhetoric and claims, along with its unpretentious choice of texts familiar in the American undergraduate curriculum, are just what is needed for the subject, since even though claims made by cognitive scientists are currently popular in the media, so far they offer mostly suggestive rather than conclusive evidence about the brain function of readers. Cognitive literary criticism is making waves not because it offers hard science to a mushy field or because it supersedes older forms of academic criticism or proves them useless or mistaken. On the contrary, Zunshine's readers will understand and agree with her hypotheses only if they can, as they read with her, become aware of their own processes of understanding and interpretation—processes that are already in place but are normally subconscious. Zunshine states her claims as descriptions of what "we" think, how we react, how we understand as we encounter the words, thoughts, and actions of the characters in a novel. Her claim that readers' theories of mind drive or guide their understanding of literary texts gradually brings us to the recognition that Zunshine

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is not only describing what we do when we understand other people (insofar as we do), but that our understanding of fictional characters follows from that real-life ability.

"We," then, are not only students of literature but also all those who have ever listened to or told stories, since all humans, the argument goes, have an evolved mind-reading capacity. The theory that we can all infer what others think or believe on the basis of what we hear from them and observe about them is part of an account of the universal human ability to live in groups—that is, to manage a cooperative social life. The assumption is that humans wouldn't have survived as a species if we couldn't somehow gauge what others were thinking without their telling us, or what they were intending to do before they did it. Those of our ancestors who did survive were those who had developed the ability to avoid the hostility of others by predicting it (and running), in good time.

Zunshine thus introduces to literary discussion the claim that all newborn humans need to understand their human condition of intersubjectivity, and the sooner the better. They are evolved to use their experience to track eye movements, facial expressions, bodily posture, and gestures for evidence of others' unseen thoughts, feelings, and most important, intentions toward themselves. The basis for our understanding stories, and also for our attraction to them, is that we all do come to understand the parallels between our own intentionality and that of others, normally by the age of three or four. Because each of us from infancy has been studying faces, our "default interpretation of behavior is that it reflects a person's state of mind" (4). Every successful encounter with another person, in life or in a story, "reinforces our tendency to make that kind of interpretation first."

Our ability to read not only the faces and minds of others but also pictures and even cartoon sketches, and our ability to enliven characters described by words on a page, suggests that we are always ready and able to create characters and to infer their internal states from linguistic and visual clues, almost no matter how bare they be. Thus, when reading novels, we magnify even the slightest clues to help us understand the "minds" of the characters named. Not only are we evolved to be successful at this kind of inference but also we can no more turn off our ability to read minds than we can hear our native language as merely noise. Authors depend on this ability and exploit it. "Fiction engages, teases, and pushes to its tentative limits our mind-reading capacities" (4). Starting with a set of

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familiar texts (*Mrs. Dalloway, Clarissa,* and *Lolita,* among others) and adding a discussion of detective fiction (making entirely clear how little her theories depend on "high" art), Zunshine integrates the new perspective in ways that extend and deepen our understanding of some important recent concerns in literary theory and criticism. Several of the issues that have provoked debate among literary critics and theorists in recent years, specifically the phenomenology of readers' response, the identification of unreliable narrators, and the structure and meaning of genre classification, are here opened up in new ways.

In the last quarter of the last century, reader-response theorists sought to describe the dynamic of the reading process from the point of view of readers whose understanding of a text is built out of personal experience yet is constrained by the semiotic codes and values of their cultures and communities, which give structure to their experience. In Wolfgang Iser's view of reading, for example, the meaning of a work is a joint creation of the author and the reader—something that materializes in midair, so to speak, between the text of the book and the reader's meaning-making activity. Meaning-making, in Iser's view, is something learned within a culture and thus is different for different people, although, as Stanley Fish demonstrates, its rules might be so uniform within a reading community as to be virtually invisible. Some theorists argued that the meaning readers themselves create might be even more important and more interesting than the meaning of "the poem itself" or the author's intended meaning. Some thought it might actually be the only meaning available anyway.

Considering the making of meaning from the perspective of Theory of Mind, readers use their ability to read minds in order to follow literary characters, and to follow their reading of other characters' minds, into several dimensions. Assuming that authors manipulate our mind reading by controlling and structuring the way they feed us information, we can watch characters catch signals about what other characters might be thinking of them, or of others, in reasonably complex patterns of interactive guessing. Except for the new vocabulary, this is something we always did. But in Zunshine's opening example we see a new question on the horizon. She asks us how we know that Peter Walsh's trembling (when he visits Clarissa Dalloway on the morning of her party, not having seen her for many years) "is to be accounted for by his excitement at seeing his old love again . . . and not by his progressing Parkinson's disease" (3). Asking not about a reader's response but about how the reader would account

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for that understanding, Zunshine's question is almost but not quite the same as earlier theoretical inquiry. Reader-response theorists argued that we know what the words mean because we know the social and literary codes that govern social and literary interactions. "Knowing" the codes, in this view, means knowing the default values. If you're reading about a social encounter in a novel and not about a case history in a medical text, then assume that trembling in the context of the relationship between a man and a woman signifies intense feeling. Experienced readers know which codes to apply and how to choose which of the possible explanations is likely to be the intended one. But Zunshine turns out to be getting at something different: she asks how it is that everyone, no matter what their social context, assumes automatically that they can understand other people by observing their bodies. She is not asking for the evidence for our interpretation but rather why we take that evidence to be evidence. She inserts an earlier level of questioning. What is it, she asks, that allows us to assume that we can understand internal meaning—intentions and beliefs—on the basis of external evidence such as how people look and behave and what they say. In her discussion of *Mrs. Dalloway,* then, and *Clarissa,* among others, Zunshine moves beyond the generalization that "every single act of writing and reading fiction" depends on and exploits our theory of mind, and explores how different writers "push to their limits certain aspects of the *general, constant, ongoing experimentation* with the human mind that constitutes the process of reading and writing fiction" (73; Zunshine's italics). The investigation very soon helps us see how powerful is our ability to keep track of *"who* thought, wanted, and felt what and *when"* (5). Not only can we infer what someone is thinking, we can infer what they are thinking about other's actions and thoughts.

When Mrs. Dalloway's husband Richard observes their friend Hugh take out an expensive fountain pen to write a letter he has composed at the request of Lady Bruton to the *Times,* Virginia Woolf relates the small incident so that (here is Zunshine's partial summary): "Richard *suspects* that Lady Bruton indeed *believes* that because, as Hugh *says,* the makers of the pen *think* that it will never wear out, the editor of the *Times* will *respect* and publish the ideas recorded by this pen" (27). Grammatical analysis of this sentence would clarify the levels of embedding it involves. Zunshine cites some recent experimental work in which the limits of our ability to correctly untangle such embedding were tested. The experiments suggest that after four levels of recursive embedding, many people

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lose track of the intentionality as described. Looking at these exchanges from this point of view allows Zunshine to distinguish among different styles of narration and offer an explanation of why Woolf's novel "places extraordinarily high demands on our mind-reading ability." While we can all manage "A wants B to believe that C thinks that X," Woolf asks more of us. For example, you'll probably find the following nonliterary example impenetrable: "When you told me you didn't know what came of Maria's having telephoned Joel, were you assuming I'd recognize that you suspect the call was to ask him to encourage Alan to withdraw his resignation?" Thus it's not surprising that inexperienced readers are afraid of Virginia Woolf. Zunshine reports, however, that when she explains to her students that "Woolf tends to play this particular kind of cognitive 'mind game' with her readers, it significantly eases their anxiety . . . and helps them to start enjoying her style" (35).

As the complications within narratives multiply, so do the opportunities for misunderstanding. It is virtually conventional in nineteenth-century English novels for the plot to be shaped by a major character's misreading of another character's mind early on, and, as happens in many of Jane Austen's novels, the rest of the plot brings the protagonists around to better understanding and thus to the happy ending. (Zunshine discusses *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*.) Some characters, of course, don't misunderstand, and readers may learn to identify a reliable mind reader in the story and depend on his or her interpretations. The writer, as we saw of Virginia Woolf, depends on but also may challenge readers' abilities to keep track of who thinks what about whom when. Sometimes the reader can see that a character has misunderstood, but sometimes the reader is misled along with the character. To describe these complex possibilities, Zunshine introduces a concept of metarepresentation to describe the human mind's talent for forming and using representations about representations. The metarepresentations tag the representations to which they are attached with source information and with qualifying evaluative and contextual meaning. They link representations with other information that may be useful when it is retrieved. They footnote the representation, as it were, storing the information by which one can later judge the reliability of the representation by recording who said it and in what circumstances. In fiction the tagging system works the same way, but it's the author, not the world, who controls the amount of information available and the timing of its release. A quick look at a ballad in the

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repertoire of Joan Baez will show just how important metarepresentation is in determining action and how the author and/or genre control it. In a tale of thwarted love, the shiny object of the title, *The Silver Dagger*, seems at first to be the major threat to the lovers' union, but in four short stanzas the speaker makes clear that her mother's strongest weapon is her words, and it is they that do the damage. The mother's lesson is about the need to understand metarepresentation, and is based on her own experience of being lied to.

> Don't sing love songs, you'll wake my mother
> She's sleeping here right by my side
> And in her right hand a silver dagger,
> She says that I can't be your bride.
>
> All men are false, says my mother,
> They'll tell you wicked, lovin' lies.
> The very next evening, they'll court another,
> Leave you alone to pine and sigh.
>
> My daddy is a handsome devil
> He's got a chain five miles long,
> And on every link a heart does dangle
> Of another maid he's loved and wronged.
>
> Go court another tender maiden,
> And hope that she will be your wife,
> For I've been warned, and I've decided
> To sleep alone all of my life.

The traditional density of the ballad form lets us see quickly how dependent the interrelationship of the four personae is on mind reading. The first-person speaker tells us not only that "All men are false" but also how she knows: "says my mother." Trusting her source, she tells the man to "Go court another tender maiden," making explicit her trust in her mother's words: "For I've been warned, and I've decided." "All men are false" is the focal representation—the crucial content on which the speaker's four actions turn (her opening command to someone not to sing, her decision, refusal, and recommendation to him). She has tagged the content with a label (my mother told me) that will remind her of

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its source. She uses it in combination with her own knowledge of her father's behavior to decide to trust its reliability. The last sentence, further, tags her own representation ("I've decided") for her audience, assuring us that it's her own decision—not her mother's silver dagger—that backs her decision.

Note that the audience of the song can make an additional metarepresentation about the content based on its ballad genre. The last stanza in this ballad provides information that suggests a last-minute reevaluation of the moral, although it is one the audience makes, not the speaker. The picture we develop of the protagonist in the first three stanzas leads us to believe we are dealing with the breakup of a love affair based on reasonable advice from a mother to a daughter. But after hearing in the last line that the speaker rejects not only the man to whom she speaks but all men, we may decide that the mother's advice unfairly hobbles her daughter's future by leading her to decide to "sleep alone all of [her] life." As Zunshine describes it, it is not only the speaker who has the ability to tag information. We the audience also hold information "under advisement," allowing us to change our mind about the value or truth of the whole narrative when new information emerges.

As we have seen in the short ballad narrative, and as we read a novel, knowing the origin of any particular scrap of representation is crucial. In fact, whatever we know about the context of the scraps of information that faute de mieux guide our lives helps us reuse it felicitously, to use John Austin's term for the successful performance of a speech act. And as Zunshine demonstrates, "our tendency to keep track of sources of our representations—to *metarepresent* them—is a particular cognitive endowment closely related to our mind-reading ability" (47). Examples of our power to assess representations for their reliability by making inferences about their source occupy several interesting sections of *Why We Read Fiction*. Since 1961, when Wayne Booth called attention to the phenomenon of unreliable narrators, critics have broken down the category further and with further subtlety.[1] Given how difficult it can be for readers or for a character in a novel to follow all the layers of reliability at which information comes to them and to tag them properly, each with contextual complications, it would seem that far from being the default assumption, the reliability of the information available to readers and to other characters in the book is not occasionally but typically doubtful. The possibilities of embedded misunderstandings are dizzying and, depending on the genre,

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lead to tragedy or to farce. Zunshine describes one such error in *Clarissa*, a novel that

> articulates, with a hitherto-unprecedented intensity and detail, the theme of the correlation between arduous mind-reading and tragic misunderstanding. . . . Mind-reading is a crucial aspect of our everyday existence, but a character too occupied with figuring out other people's states of mind, and worse, flaunting his ability to "see through" other people, runs a grave metarepresentational danger: he can easily lose track of himself as the source of his representations of the other person's mental world. (89)

Zunshine also cites an episode from the TV series *Friends* as an example of how the same kinds of complications can lead to farce. The close dependence on genre of too much unreliability is an important point, and one easy to miss because of the overall and correct claim Zunshine makes for ToM, namely that readers approach the characters in books and understand the understanding of authors and of characters in books by means of the same skills they depend on for their everyday communicative (interpersonal) competence. At the same time, novels are not life, and crucially, although ToM works well enough often enough for it to be described as a felicitous evolutionary advance, novels and other fictional narratives are precisely not interested in the way things normally work. The mind-reading successes of everyday life fall into the background of novels, while the failures are news or, as Mary Louise Pratt describes them, "tellable" (136).

The boundary genre or test case in which the job of sorting useful knowledge from disinformation is, as Zunshine recognizes, the detective story, to which the last third of her book is dedicated. Her interesting examination reveals, for example, how the genre is constrained by the high demands made on the readers' mind-reading abilities of having to assume (as the detective must) that everyone is lying. It is her discussion of the way mind reading interacts with the distinctive demands of different genres that leads Zunshine to the concluding discussion of whether different genres match different ways of knowing (different ways of mind reading). This question seems to suggest that if they work in different ways, they do different things. And if they do things at all, are they doing things that make a difference? Are they teaching us or training us in any way? To use our innate intersubjective skills more efficiently, perhaps,

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or more ethically? Do novels, by exercising our mind-reading abilities, train us to live with others? This is a conclusion Zunshine hesitates to embrace.

If we understand literary texts because we understand other people, and whatever is consciously designed or contrived by an author is superimposed upon or grounded in the real world of human brains and knowing, then, minimally, reading novels should afford the same kind of practice in making appropriate guesses about the unseeable minds of others as real interpersonal actions do. Except that the minds of characters aren't minds: they're fictional creations. Is it possible, then, that the fictionality of a text cancels or interferes with or brackets this experience—keeps it from teaching us—in the same way that knowing we're watching a play keeps us from jumping up to save Desdemona before Othello strangles her?[2] Does the genre determination (play or novel, for example) give a reader permission to bracket the intended or unintended ethical teaching of a work of art? It certainly seems impossible to demonstrate that readers of *Anna Karenina* or *Madame Bovary* learn not to be unfaithful to their husbands. Does fiction do more than "engage and titillate our metarepresentational capacity" (79)? Zunshine seems careful never to overreach herself, having learnt an important lesson from earlier literary scholars who have been criticized for the counterintuitiveness of their claims about what cognitive science can tell us about literature. She never allows herself to claim more than that novels provide pleasure, (certainly a safe claim, because it's what most people would say if asked why they read novels), but she does define pleasure in a new way. She sees the pleasure afforded by fictional narratives as

> grounded in our awareness of the successful testing of our mind-reading adaptations, in the respite that such a testing offers us from our everyday mind-reading uncertainties, or in some combination of the two . . . [with the proviso that] the joys of reading fictional minds are subject to some of the same instabilities that render our real-life mind-reading both exciting and exasperating. (20)

On the very last page of the book Zunshine mentions several ways in which our exercise of ToM in reading fiction may reach further than the above description allows. Much work remains to be done to specify the nature of the pleasure of reading, and I'd guess that more work on

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the heuristic power of specific genres would be relevant here. Zunshine has used the terms *fiction, stories,* and *novel* interchangeably throughout her text, but I would think that clearer distinctions among the terms would bring us closer to answering questions about the relationship between fictional teaching and delighting. Novels certainly make the claim of exhibiting truths; even if the narratives aren't themselves true, and even when they are outrageously fictional (thinking of the Harry Potter books again), they certainly can claim to be "true to the truths of the human heart," in Nathaniel Hawthorne's words. We will gain, I suspect, by working out the kinds of claims that different genres and even different subgenres conventionally make on readers. Detective stories, for example, expect readers to use their everyday logic and knowledge of the real world to compete with the detective in solving a mystery, but it goes without saying that the crime itself, the plot, is contrived. *Fiction* is probably not a useful genre term because fact and fiction are so thoroughly mixed in texts and in life.

I wonder if Zunshine would agree that we read novels and exercise our mental endowments precisely because the genre gives us permission to do so without the consequences that such "work" would have in the real world. The genre of novel (not of story, or of fiction) may be pleasurable for the very reason that we can, say, think about adultery without the consequences of indulging in it. And as long as you cover your book in a plain brown wrapper, there wouldn't even be such consequences as might arise if others know what you're reading. This is still in the realm of speculation, but I'd say that the distinctions between fiction, narrative, story, and novel are going to have to been taken more seriously before a fuller answer to why we read novels can be given.

Zunshine's book is not only a good beginning; it will also serve, as Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* did, as a stimulant to important further work. We are already seeing, in the year since the book appeared (it is already in its third printing), more detailed work on the operation of ToM in reading novels and on its neurological underpinnings. But I am particularly interested in seeing the development of this work in organizing and providing structure to the wastebasket we now call context. ToM should be able to contribute to a theoretically satisfying answer to the question of why author's intentions have always seemed naturally to be of primary importance and yet were so easily dethroned when challenged by French and American deconstructionist theory and criticism. The brain question

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is: just how do we decide (and the decision has to be instantaneous) what parts of the context of an exchange should be attended to? Zunshine's book sets us on an interesting path toward understanding how we know what is interesting.

Notes

1. By the 2004 publication of James Phelan's *Living to Tell About It,* there were at least six distinguishable kinds of unreliability, but the discussion is far from over.

2. See John Tooby and Leda Cosmides and my answer to them in *SubStance.* See also Suzanne Keen on what novels can do.

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Literatures between Borders

Ethnic American Literature: Comparing Chicano, Jewish, and African American Writing
by Dean J. Franco
Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006. 219 pages

Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America
by David Cowart
Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. 249 pages

Delia C. Konzett

At the end of John Sayles's film *Lone Star* (1996), former teenage lovers finally reunite two decades later in spite of family opposition. As an ethnically mixed couple living in a contemporary Texas border town divided by multiple and conflicting legacies, the star-crossed lovers logically assume their families' objections are related to matters of segregation, the xenophobic need to keep races and cultures distinct and separate. The Oedipal-like revelation that ends the film—the lovers are in fact half brother and sister—comes as part of a murder investigation conducted by the hero, who delves into his late father's dubious past as well as the town's racist history. Genealogy is represented in the film not as a historical inquiry into a remote past but as an ongoing criminal investigation that implicates everyone in the present. *Lone Star*'s provocative inquiry into border culture and its competing ethnic legacies and historical moments reflects accurately the current complex landscape of America's strained multiculturalism and diversity. Is it possible to construe a national genealogy that does justice to diversity and the elusive remembered time of the nation configured differently by various and competing groups? Two new studies, Dean J. Franco's *Ethnic American Literature* and David Cowart's *Trailing Clouds* take up this question in their analysis of the diverse corpus of contemporary American literary voices and literatures.

Dean J. Franco's study begins with a chapter titled "The Jew Who Got Away," in which he asks the question whether ethnic literature can ever be written without the shadow of a legacy, a past, and a tradition. In particular, he explores how authors such as Philip Roth and Cynthia

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Ozick "resist the totalizing gravity of Holocaust history in America" (30). The concern here is not to weaken the legacy of the Shoah but to challenge a tendency in which "popular US history assimilates the histories of ethnic groups into a single history, often divesting plural histories of their particularity" (31). Franco warns that the imagined homogeneity of ethnic groups repeats older, exclusionary models and contributes to the problem of the "repression of a nation's difference." Once meant to work through problematic legacies of slavery, colonialism, and genocide, remembrance in art and literature has turned into a commodity enterprise, often producing clichéd narratives of traumatic histories and easily digestible ethnic identities. Historical distance from an event such as the Holocaust has led, according to Franco, to a Freudian defense mechanism in which "America's nationalist culture has transferred its own cultural problems onto the story of the Holocaust" (32). The key question that arises for literature is its ability to memorialize a traumatic event or legacy without distorting it and making it subservient to dominant narratives of the nation. Can the Holocaust be remembered as a "catastrophic event without redemption" rather than being "overwritten in American culture with the narrative of hope and renewal" (33) in light of the success and sanctuary that Jewish culture found in America? Success narratives of post–World War II Jewish American culture often read like a hybrid of "posttraumatic stress disorder with the Protestant work ethic" (35), recapitulating the promises of the American dream and exhorting other minorities to do likewise. In light of this distortion, writers like Ozick and Roth present narratives that confront the co-optation of memory and critique the "appropriation of Holocaust history by non-survivors" (53) in Ozick's *The Messiah of Stockholm* and Roth's *The Ghost Writer,* foregrounding the "extreme distancing of the Holocaust in American life through banal and universalizing performance."

Interestingly, "Holocaust-oriented tropes of history" (56) can also be found in other ethnic literatures, thereby attesting to the "mutual construction of ethnic others and America" (103). Thus elements of melancholy and incomprehensible loss resurface also in the novels of Chicano writer Alejandro Morales, evoking histories of Spanish colonialism, oppression, and disease brought to the native Indians. As with the Holocaust, this momentous historical event, represented in the novel's plague, points to a "startling lack of agency for individuals caught up in history" (62). Franco likens Morales to Roth and Ozick as they draw heavily from trau-

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matic histories of the past to construe tenuous identities of the present. In contrast, Franco claims, African American literature does not operate "in such a psychical space of historical memory" (73) and produces new types of recovered group identity. The body of African American writing, he claims, is more concerned with "material work, including the struggles for civil rights and ending racism in the social and legal system" (74). This bold distinction by Franco places African American literature more into the proximity of social action and less into a tradition of genealogical and reflective clarification. While one may not entirely agree with such a stark separation of the two literary projects of trauma history and social action, it does draw attention to the significant differences between ethnic groups ranging from white ethnics to less assimilable groups (African Americans, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and African, Caribbean, and Southeast Asian immigrants) still fighting for social, political, and cultural recognition.

The illustration for Franco's assertion is found in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Citing from the novel, Franco erects an opposition between the discourse of trauma and a historically interventionist discourse of claim: "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (*Beloved* 95). To the extent that a minority group has achieved the status of ownership, it can then indulge in the luxury of engaging in revisionary trauma history. In Franco's reading, Morrison's novel is both about historical trauma and material redress, putting forth reparation claims as legitimate demands rather than passive narratives of victimization that stress melancholy, resentment, or facile identification. To be sure, Franco speaks here of reparation more as an ethical construct in the novel than as legal action. His reading of Morrison is supported by the fact that she edited Morris Bittker's study *The Case for Black Reparations* (1973) at Random House. Her novel, according to Franco, does not promote concrete measures of reparation but raises the ethical imperative of compensation, both symbolic and material, to right the injustices of history. Franco's innovative reading thus restores to Morrison's highly sophisticated, aesthetic novel a proper pragmatic context of social action. Unfortunately, the section on African American writing, while provocative, is brief (only *Beloved* is discussed in several pages) and therefore does not fully deserve mention in the book's title.

Overall, Franco's work can be appreciated for the provocative new questions and comparisons with which it approaches the field of con-

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temporary American ethnic writing, particularly Chicano traditions of border literature (Gloria Anzaldúa, Helena Maria Viramontes) and their unexpected parallels with Jewish American diaspora writings (Philip Roth, Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin's critical writings), as well as shared overlapping interests in outing ethnicity and denationalizing American identity (Arturo Islas, Cherrie Moraga, Tony Kushner). As a study of literature, Franco's work is eclectic and by no means inclusive of many recent authors or groups of ethnic literatures. Asian American literatures and Native American literatures are virtually not considered in this study. As significant bodies of writing in a cultural and linguistic sense, they could have contributed to a more complex understanding of the interplay between aesthetic and pragmatic goals in ethnic literatures. This otherwise very readable and informative study suffers from not being able to account for the wide scope of present ethnic American literatures and their complex interactions. Perhaps a more modest title limiting itself to a comparative study between Chicano and Jewish traditions would have provided sharper focus to the study. However, its consideration of important exponents of ethnic writing such as Roth, Ozick, Kushner, Morrison, Morales, Moraga, and Limon, along with its conceptual strength, make it a very promising work for new and productive approaches to the study of multiculturalism. Franco's book ultimately opens up an interesting new comparison between Jewish American and Chicano literatures, revealing shared traditions of immigration, exile, and diaspora in different but coexisting historical contexts of American settlement.

David Cowart's *Trailing Clouds* can be seen as a corrective to Franco's more narrowly designed study. Cowart extensively ranges over diverse immigrant writings by authors who either directly or indirectly reflect on the experience of immigration. The study includes writers from a wide variety of nations, including Canada (Saul Bellow), Poland (Jerzy Kozinski), Russia (Vladimir Nabokov), the Dominican Republic (Julia Alvarez, Junot Diaz), West Germany (Ursula Hegi), India (Bharati Mukherjee), Cuba (Cristina Garcia), Korea (Chang-rae Lee), Haiti (Edwidge Danticat), Vietnam (Lan Cao), Antigua (Jamaica Kincaid), the Netherlands (Mylene Dressler), and Myanmar (Wendy Law-Yone). This impressive range of immigrant writers of different national descent is meant to illustrate the diversity of voices in contemporary American literature. In spite of such diversity, Cowart believes that the shared experience of immigration produces fairly stable key features that characterize its expression in fic-

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tion. His typology of ten features includes (1) fragmentary narration, (2) inserted folktales from the old country, (3) learning English as a second language, (4) anthropological point of view by narrators, (5) topos of an unlivable homeland, (6) psychological doubling, (7) eating disorders in women's fiction, (8) immigrant-on-immigrant exploitation, (9) movement from homesickness toward eventual settlement in the US, and (10) cultural struggle often experienced as generational conflict of value systems (7–8).

As with Franco, Cowart is eager to construe overlapping interests and concerns in the interest of a certain cross-solidarity, occasionally falling into idealization. For example, while Cowart discusses Saul Bellow in innovative fashion as a first-generation immigrant writer (Shloime Bellow was born in Quebec and lived in Montreal until age nine), he does not address the significant question of why Bellow obscured this past and positioned himself as a quintessential American writer. Similarly, he does not discuss Bellow's cultural conservatism or his proximity to the anti-liberal-education stance of his close friend and colleague at the University of Chicago, the controversial philosopher Allan Bloom, which put him at odds with the academy's recent abandonment of an Anglonormative, Eurocentric canon. Cowart is more open-minded in this respect but still indebted to the claims of elitist traditions. He writes:

> The literary art of immigrants similarly demands distinctive structures, and the more resourceful the individual artist, the more likely she or he will transcend the merely subjective and achieve work that will compete for readers long after the current vogue of ethnicity has been displaced by newer cultural trends. (41)

He is justifiably wary of the marketability of ethnicity and wishes to give more attention to authors who have articulated the complex situation of ethnic identity in equally challenging works of literature. As a literary critic, he is interested in establishing certain work-intrinsic features in order to reveal the artistic work of construction and its transformation into an aesthetics that makes a literary work something more than a sociological document. Throughout his discussion of the diversity of immigrant experience, Cowart shows a strong appreciation for the literary techniques by means of which this diversity is evoked. Cross-references to American fiction thus not only tend to incorporate immigrant writers into an ex-

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panding American canon but also seek to do justice to the artistic ingenuity of the authors and works presented in this study. Franco, conversely, relies on recent methodologies of cultural studies where the critic frames the discussion of a work with provocative extrinsic theoretical, historical, and cultural accounts, making the work yield its socioanthropological insights, so to speak. While Cowart's approach sacrifices cultural difference or ethnicity to some degree for the sake of literary value, Franco's study can be said to do the reverse.

The more narrowly defined area of literary acculturation allows Cowart's study to provide us with exciting observations about how immigrant writers come to terms with their split identities. These identities may share a similar narrative structure in having to overcome sentimental myths of belonging, be it in relation to the old or the new country, but they also portray immigrant experience in diverse and different ways. In the case of Julia Alvarez's work, the loss of a foreign accent signifies the ultimate loss of a homeland and myths of belonging: "The myth of redemption and return . . . is precisely what the exile must sooner or later surrender" (54). Ursula Hegi's fiction presents us with the less typical "beta" immigrant, forsaking myths of progress and success to monomaniacal fantasies of separateness and absenteeism. Conversely, Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* satirizes immigrant assimilationist zeal in which rootlessness and ruthlessness coexist side by side. As Cowart summarizes the heroine's development: "Has she learned America's least attractive lesson: that nothing lasts, that roots preclude mobility, that one should stay on the move?" (81). In Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuba,* the stereotypical generation conflict among immigrants is shown in a new and reverse fashion: "she depicts the first generation, in the person of Lourdes Puente, as the one enjoying a largely untrammeled assimilation, while Pilar, Lourdes's daughter, idealizes the world they left behind in Cuba" (87). The Korean American author Chang-rae Lee breaks with the myth of the model immigrant in *The Native Speaker* with its hero engaged in espionage and duplicity: "Lee's Henry Park succeeds at his work largely because he is willing to exploit in others the vulnerabilities that trouble his own alterity" (111). Thus while immigrant fiction is a shared rite of symbolic initiation into Americanness, it is also, as Cowart's study suggests, a radically diverse enterprise, displaying a seemingly infinite range of responses—anger, resistance, eagerness—to narratives of assimilation and Americanization.

Immigrant fiction complicates the grid of contemporary American

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ethnic fiction, since it is further inflected by different national traditions. According to sociologist Saskia Sassen, European multiculturalism, with its additional ingredient of multinationalism, is in many significant ways more open to growth than America's mononational version. While the United States views itself foremost as a country of multiculturalism, it does not yet possess the multinational character of Europe or Canada. Approaching Cowart's study with this in mind, one is curious how immigrant writers can actively reshape the contours of America's mononational discourse. Here it is interesting to note that Cowart is initially more concerned with thoroughly anchoring immigrant writings in the national tradition of Anglo American literature. Numerous and highly erudite references to parallels with this body of literature make immigrant writings appear to be consonant with canonical fiction ranging from Dos Passos, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Barnes to the recent works of Pynchon and DeLillo. However, with a selection of writers from different ethnic, national, and cultural backgrounds, a degree of sociocultural information and framing would also be helpful to appreciate their distinct national identities. Cowart's study, following the work of Werner Sollers, instead reads immigrant fiction more as a shared rite of symbolic initiation in which one finally comes to terms with the inevitable outcome of having become an American. Nevertheless, in the latter part of his study, Cowart stresses the multinational and increasingly global character of recent American immigrant fiction, commenting on the writer's choice of location and setting found more and more to be outside the US. Indeed, Cowart notices a significant shift in recent immigrant fiction that allows much more space for the country of origin than in earlier generations of immigrant writers:

> More recent immigrant writers—Ha Jin, Anchee Min, and a host of Indians come to mind—need not bother with fictional treatments of their new homeland at all, so ready is the American readership for undiluted ethnicity. (129)

Perhaps this phenomenon could also be attributed to the gaining prestige of global literatures, allowing immigrants to position themselves less as conflicted Americans than as global citizens residing in America, thereby coming closer to Sassen's vision of multiculturalism as inflected by multi- and transnationalism. In this vein, immigrant writers also change the subject matter of their works: "Danticat has in fact devoted herself to

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remembering, reimagining, and revisiting Haiti more than to representing the American scene" (128). Cowart views this strategy as a parallel to present American economic trends: "more and more 'offshore' production" (129). Other writers such as the Antiguan Jamaica Kincaid are said to have made an altogether unsuccessful passage between country of origin and destiny: "As an expatriate, she excoriates both societies, frequently lashing out at England as well" (140).

Overall, Cowart's study reveals an implicit structure in which immigrant culture is depicted as a rite of passage, demystified as homogeneous or as a necessarily redemptive experience but also shown to be of significant contribution to the changing contours of American culture. He argues that *Monkey Bridge,* a novel by the Vietnamese author Lan Cao, for example, challenges monocultural accounts of recent American history with Vietnamese Americans recalling the war from their "transpacific vantage" (159). As such, the novel critically inserts itself into a postmodern landscape that conveniently prefers amnesia over historical memory but nevertheless challenges binaries erected in cultural studies in which immigrants are presumed to remain forever outsiders to America, thereby essentializing prejudice (158). Cao's novel shows its heroine's difficult but successful acculturation, leading to a university education and the eventual possibility of public intervention. "Nowhere," Cowart notes, "is it written that one must wait a generation or two before joining that critical chorus" (207) that assesses and critiques American institutions. At the same time, Cowart insists that the writers in his study "identify themselves as artists first, immigrants second" and are "more in tune with the reality principle that governs the relationship between a societal center and its margins." The immigrant, then, is not an anomaly of the American discursive and literary landscape, petitioning for a right to entry: "In fact the American subject was always already an immigrant" (210). And while Cowart, in his adherence to aesthetic norms, refrains from endorsing a stronger cultural studies point of view as seen in Franco, he agrees with Franco that the discussion of borders, citizenship, and nationhood are the defining issues or topoi for American literature in the twenty-first century.

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You! hypocrite lecteur!

New Readings of T. S. Eliot

Gender, Desire, and Sexuality in T. S. Eliot
edited by Cassandra Laity and Nancy K. Gish
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 265 pages

Carrie J. Preston

Readers, hypocritical or otherwise, have found in T. S. Eliot a range of causes for complaint, celebration, and inspiration over the past three-quarters of a century. Once a laurelled star of literary criticism, Eliot has more recently been cast by postmodernism as the reactionary gatekeeper of a masculinist, elitist, and monolithic modernism. With the incorporation of gender theory, feminism, and postcolonial theory, among others, modernist studies has redefined a modernism that can encompass multiplicity and alternative gender identities. Indeed, one of the highlights of *Gender, Desire, and Sexuality in T. S. Eliot* is Cassandra Laity's introduction, a concise and thorough history of modernist studies that summarizes major contributions and the debates that have reinvigorated the field. As Laity points out, critics have been slower to use new theories to reconsider Eliot than other "hypermasculine" modernists such as W. B. Yeats and James Joyce (2). This wide-ranging collection of essays, edited by Laity and Nancy K. Gish, resituates Eliot with the tools of expanded feminist, queer, and gender theories. Divided into three sections, "Homoeroticisms," "Desire," and "Modern Women," the volume offers important new readings of Eliot's poetry, drama, criticism, and biography. While its diversity of topics and approaches is admirable, the collection does not always deliver on its promise to engage the most current critical trends, especially in queer theory. Still, it provides valuable insight for those interested in modernism and gender, and it is absolutely essential reading for scholars of Eliot.

The first section, "Homoeroticisms," despite its title, does not deal centrally with homoerotic elements in Eliot's work, except in Colleen Lamos's contribution. The *s* appended to *homoeroticism* suggests an alignment with queer theory's deconstruction of binaries such as gay/straight and masculine/feminine. There is a plurality of sexualities, according to

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this position, and the experiences of homosexuals are too diverse to be encompassed by a singular category. This section, however, does not adequately explore how such a concept would produce new understandings of Eliot. As Colleen Lamos recognizes in "The Love Song of T. S. Eliot: Elegiac Homoeroticism in the Early Poetry," Eliot is a problematic figure, an "avowedly heterosexual, homophobic writer" (23) who actively censored early readings of homoeroticism in his work. Lamos hopes to avoid the usual dependence on biographical evidence to discuss same-gender desires: "Uncovering homoerotic impulses does not unlock the enigma of Eliot's personality." Instead she argues that Eliot's use of the genre of elegy allows him to articulate a homoeroticism that the trope of death both enables and controls. Yet her claim that "he is a textbook illustration" (33) of Judith Butler's theory of "heterosexual melancholia" in *The Psychic Life of Power* demonstrates the difficulty of avoiding the biographical. Butler's formulation explains how the heterosexualized subject negates early same-gender attachments but preserves them through "melancholic incorporation" (32). As a "textbook illustration," Eliot's subjectivity or "personality," rather than his poetry, is described by the theory. The most suggestive work of the essay connects Butler's "heterosexual melancholia" to the genre of elegy.

Using Eliot's theory of impersonality, Tim Dean's "T. S. Eliot, Famous Clairvoyante" takes a different approach to the question of personality and sexuality. Often derided in modernist studies as an evasive dissimulation, impersonality actually accounts for otherness and, according to Dean, "should be considered ethically exemplary rather than politically suspect" (44). Eliot uses impersonality to theorize the poet as a conduit for other voices and experiences. Yet Dean's statement that "Eliot imagines figures for the ideal impersonalist poet as eminently rapable" (45), figures that are primarily "women [Madame Sosostris] and sexually ambiguous youths [Saint Sebastian]," suggests the limits of this version of ethical impersonality. The poet's access to and idealization of these "rapable" subjects does not suggest a political program for change. Dean usefully contextualizes impersonality within modernist spiritualism and connects it to Yeats's interest in the occult. He could look backward as well and explore ways this version of impersonality participates in a tradition stemming from the Victorian dramatic monologue.

In "'Cells in One Body': Nation and Eros in the Early Work of T. S. Eliot," Michele Tepper rereads "Tradition and the Individual Talent" with

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two lesser-known essays, "Was There a Scottish Literature?" and "Reflections on Contemporary Poetry [IV]," all published in 1919. Tepper demonstrates the prevalence of erotic energy in Eliot's criticism, especially in his theories of the poet's relationship to tradition, and argues that anxieties about sexuality are inseparable from concerns with national literatures. Although Tepper, like other critics in this section, claims that "homoerotic energies" are "channeled into the maintenance of the heterocentric social order" (71), her readings actually suggest the inadequacy of the heterosexual/homosexual binary. Eliot's pronouns slip between genders and the poet as a bearer of tradition is feminized through images of pregnancy. Tepper discusses this briefly in the penultimate paragraph, where she claims that the erotic in Eliot is "not reducible to genital sexuality" (80). This crucial paragraph is one of few in the volume that positions Eliot in relation to contemporary debates in queer theory and earns the title of the section, "Homoeroticisms."

Peter Middleton's "The Masculinity behind the Ghosts of Modernism in Eliot's *Four Quartets*" closely examines several republications of *Burnt Norton*—as a freestanding poem in 1936, as a pamphlet in 1942, and finally as the first poem in *Four Quartets* (1944)—a series that gradually erases the gendered meanings of the original. This erasure produced "melancholic ghosts of gender and desire" (83) that haunt not only the poem but also Eliot's version of high modernism, which he was reassessing at the time. As in Lamos's essay, Butler's theories of melancholic homophobia seem designed to explicate Eliot: the process of heterosexual gendering requires the rejection of homosexual love objects and produces a melancholic subject haunted by suppressed desires. The closing essay of "Homoeroticisms," like other chapters in the first section of the book, offers interesting new readings as it comments on the suppression of the homoerotic but does not move us very far beyond Eliot's personal homophobia.

"Discarnate Desire: T. S. Eliot and the Poetics of Dissociation," Nancy K. Gish's contribution to the volume, opens the second section, "Desire." This section generally treats desire separately from questions of gender, a surprising disconnection in a book on sexuality in Eliot. Gish argues that Eliot's well-known concept of "dissociation of sensibility" was derived from pre-Freudian theories of hysteria (particularly those of Pierre Janet and William James), sources not widely recognized by critics who generally focus on connections with Matthew Arnold, Henri Bergson, F. H. Bradley, and Freud. Eliot's "poetics of dissociation" reveals the nature of

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modern consciousness by presenting speakers who are dissociated from the emotions they articulate and doubled by a "vile or dirty or mad old man" (110). This old man and the host of marionettes, dancers, and clowns that also populate his poetry are not personae, for Gish, but dissociated doubles in which displaced and "discarnate" desires are realized. While Gish's combination of psychologies and poetics of dissociation produces interesting readings, particularly of poems in *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917*, she does not position desire in relation to gendering or sexualities.

Jewel Spears Brooker's "Mimetic Desire and the Return to Origins in *The Waste Land*" contextualizes Eliot's interest in "origins" with contemporaneous studies of religion, myth, ritual, and art by scholars such as James G. Frazer and Jane Harrison. Eliot's participation in this trend is evident in his famous 1923 review of *Ulysses*, where he proposes the "mythical method" as a way of ordering the "material" of literature, which for Eliot is contemporary life (133). *The Waste Land* also reveals the trope of return, and Brooker reads the poem through René Girard's discussions of the origins of desire in his *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* and *Violence and the Sacred*. Girard theorizes desire as mimetic, "a nonconscious imitation of another desiring subject" (135), and connects desire to both sexuality and violence. Brooker draws connections between images of blood, sexuality, the city, and the real-life material of Eliot's disastrous marriage, but this approach fails to give new insight into either the poem or the biography. Her discussion of how such images prompt a return to origins is more productive, especially in her discussion of the myths of Philomel, Cleopatra, Dido, and Eve in *The Waste Land* as "survivals" (143), archetypes of the silenced, raped woman that transcend time and space.

One of the highlights of the section on desire is Charles Altieri's careful intervention, by way of affect theory, into the "reactionary" and "defensive" Eliot often depicted in contemporary criticism. In "Theorizing Emotions in Eliot's Poetry and Poetics," Altieri discusses a desiring Eliot whose formal innovations are intertwined with his model of an alternative affective life. Contrary to dominant philosophical discourses on emotion, his poetry offers a model that does not use narrative and theatrical modes to explain affect. Instead he offers a "transpersonal" (161) model akin to Lacan's, and rather than focusing on lyrical confession, this model presents complicity and ritualized participation through a variety of speakers. Altieri only begins to suggest how Eliot's theories of emotion influence

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the poetry, but he does point out that techniques such as cadence realize affect's promise of fulfillment against the urge to continue acting. Similarly, poetic juxtaposition reveals the presence of "strange attractors" (167) or unusual combinations in affective experiences. Altieri concludes with a discussion of how attention to Eliot's theories of emotion might reposition him in postmodernism, though not in gender theory.

The third section, "Modern Women," opens with Gail McDonald's examination of Eliot's literary reputation among female readers in "Through the Schoolhouse Windows: Women, the Academy, and T. S. Eliot." She points out that the height of Eliot's influence coincided with the entrance of women students into the academies of higher education: for the first generation of female postgraduates, Eliot was their ally and a revolutionary. He became the high-modernist enemy of feminist thought, according to McDonald, due in part to his conversion in 1927 and in part because drafts, letters, and biographical information depicted a masculinist Eliot, but primarily because literary criticism changed to become increasingly interested in the social, political, and gendered implications of texts. McDonald claims that understanding women's initial reception of Eliot requires historicizing their position in academic culture: the same keepers of tradition who excluded women from higher education deplored Eliot's poetry. Women were further aligned with Eliot in their protest against conventionality, provinciality, and anti-intellectualism. In an argument that resonates with Dean's rereading of the doctrine of impersonality, McDonald claims that early twentieth-century women students, attempting to enter the male territory of the academy, applauded the idea that intellectual work could be separated from the personal gender or class of a scholar. McDonald's history is an important corrective; however, the reasons for women's exclusion and interest in impersonality were very different from those of Eliot. Additionally, her history of reception leaves us questioning the shifting alliances and trends that have encouraged the critical revaluation of Eliot represented by the book under review. This would be a productive avenue for further research.

"T. S. Eliot Speaks the Body: the Privileging of Female Discourse in *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Cocktail Party*" by Richard Badenhausen examines Eliot's dramatic constructions of women characters, particularly the Chorus of the Women of Canterbury in *Murder in the Cathedral* and Celia in *The Cocktail Party*. Badenhausen claims that these characters, often thought to be stereotypes of femininity, actually establish an "experien-

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tial language of the body" (196). He associates this language or "female discourse" with the theories of French feminists, particularly Hélène Cixous's *écriture feminine*, Julia Kristeva's "semiotic communication," and Luce Irigaray's "bodily discourse." He argues that the later Eliot of the plays, rather than dramatizing a misogynistic torture of women characters, uses these figures to create a language that questions phallogocentric social arrangements and the strict polarities of masculine and feminine. Badenhausen's use of French feminism produces surprising new readings of Eliot's plays, but he does not address the concern, raised by recent feminists and gender theorists, that notions of a distinct women's writing or *écriture feminine* essentialize difference. Thus his claims that Eliot undermines dichotomies between femininity and masculinity seem to be in tension with his idea of "female discourse."

Rachel Potter's "T. S. Eliot, Women, and Democracy" describes Eliot's response to early twentieth-century political transformations, generally characterized as a move from individualistic liberalism to mass democracy. Potter argues that missing from previous accounts of Eliot's views of democracy, and modernist political thought more generally, has been the significance of the changing roles of women. Eliot's political ideas do not remain consistent over his career, but Potter points out that Eliot consistently associates femininity with the devalued or inferior position. Eliot aligned women with solipsism and egoism in poems from 1909 to 1915; he ambivalently described the democratized masses as feminine in major works from 1918 to 1920, including *The Waste Land*. Then, reversing his early claims about effeminate egoism, he viewed the decline of individual agency as a result of a "feminized tyranny of the majority." Finally, he attacked effeminate liberalism in the early 1930s (217–18). Potter's chapter is the only one in the anthology that does not question the dominant view of Eliot's misogyny. While her conclusions may seem less innovative, she continues the trend toward multiplicity in modernist studies in her close attention to how political thought changed over the period and how Eliot's portrayal of women varied correspondingly.

In "Vipers, Viragos, and Spiritual Rebels: Women in T. S. Eliot's Christian Society Plays," Elisabeth Däumer considers an overlooked genre in Eliot's oeuvre, the society plays he produced after 1939, and an overlooked individual in his life, his mother, Charlotte Stearns Eliot. Däumer argues that while the women characters in his drama appear to be drawn from misogynistic accounts of female neurosis, they actually exert a transfor-

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mative spiritual influence on the protagonists. She explains this tension with reference to Charlotte Eliot's "spiritually based feminism" (235) and the incoherence between a conventional naturalistic surface plot and a mythic and spiritual subplot. The biographical point is less significant than Däumer's description of the women characters as complex archetypes of goddesses, Fates, and Furies who awaken "religious fear" (249) and redeem, often with great personal sacrifice, the confused, empty lives of male protagonists. The final essay in the anthology, Däumer's article reveals the potential range of gender-based readings of Eliot (and many other male modernists) as she incorporates diverse genres, changing politics, biographical information, and the incommensurability of form, plot, images, and characters over the career and even within a single work.

In keeping with the turn to diverse modernisms, feminisms, and homoeroticisms, several Eliots emerge in *Gender, Desire, and Sexuality in T. S. Eliot*. One of the many strengths of the volume is the breadth of material it considers: early and late Eliot, major and minor works, and his poetry, drama, and criticism. The collection's detailed readings draw from queer theory, feminism, cultural studies, and historicisms, although few of the essays take up the most recent debates in gender theory. If the volume occasionally seems incoherent, especially in its division of the sections "Homoeroticisms" and "Desire," this incoherence often serves to more radically dislodge the Eliot of high-modernist traditionalism from a position that the chapters historicize, revaluate, and undermine. This book is a model of the new modernist studies that open diverse avenues in Eliot studies, appropriate to the poet who borrowed from Baudelaire in *The Waste Land:* "You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!"

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The Seduction of Argument and the Danger of Parody in the *Four Quartets*

Roger Bellin

> It is a very good sign when the harmonious bores are at a loss about how they should react to this continuous self-parody, when they fluctuate endlessly between belief and disbelief until they get dizzy and take what is meant as a joke seriously and what is meant seriously as a joke.
>
> —Friedrich Schlegel (13; §108)

> But is T. S. Eliot recuperable?
>
> —Fredric Jameson (303)

How are we to take seriously the conceptual discourse that makes up so much of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets?* The poem has its lyrical moments, passages rich in image and metaphor, but much of its text affords no such easy approach. It is full of asides like "There is, it seems to us, / At best, only a limited value / In the knowledge derived from experience" (EC 81–83),[1] which punctuate the poem as though summarizing a lecture and at times go on at some length. Ever since the initial appearance of "Burnt Norton" it has been a critical commonplace to regard these discursive portions as both the poem's most conceptually profound and its most formally prosaic.[2] Indeed, the discursive voice caused some among its early critics to conclude that some passages of the *Quartets* might not even merit the title of poetry.[3] But the discursive passages were composed just as laboriously as the rest of the poem (perhaps even more

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so); and it is easy to see that these apparently prosaic passages are often the same ones that carry the poem's own charge against poetry, bearing its self-critique within and among its lyrical passages. As the text of the poem itself apparently gives license to the view that its "poetry does not matter," the preponderance of critical work on the *Quartets'* nonlyrical portions has been devoted to philosophical and theological paraphrase of its argument, to explicating the system of belief or thought imagined to lie behind the words.

Little attention has yet been paid to the working of this conceptual poetry itself, to the textual construction of its presumed meaning. To begin to read the *Four Quartets* as discursive poetry requires only that we resist the initial temptation to read for an argument behind the words, discarding the assumption that the poem's discursive passages are any more direct, or less poetic, than its lyrical ones. The seductive voice of argument—which is already a voice in the poem as well as one found in its critics—invites conceptual scrutiny but repels formal analysis; it displaces the concerns of "poetry" in order to work its poetry undetected. But the seriousness of such a reading, its moral or critical sincerity, once opened to the poem's own rigorously reflexive skepticism, will unavoidably be compromised: to take the poem's own self-doubt seriously is always to risk its becoming a self-parody.

The seduction of reading the *Four Quartets* as a systematic, coherent exposition (whether of doctrine, thought, or faith) is both induced and resisted by the text itself. The text integrates paraphrases, near-quotations, and direct citations from disparate times and cultures (Heraclitus, Krishna, St. John of the Cross, etc.), and its citations appear thematically unified: all bear on time and renunciation, a negative theology or mysticism. Many critics have remarked that these quotations are "integrated" or "assimilated" (Traversi 89) rather than "twisted" into a "clash" with their original meanings like the allusions of *The Waste Land* (Gardner 30). And the formal unity of the *Quartets'* imagery and structure, their very apparent craft, suggests an analogous unity of content. But the poem itself—considered not merely as a fabric of themes, allusions, concepts, and images but as a text, as it must be—steadfastly resists systematization. The *Four Quartets* rely on paradox, contradiction, tautology, and the performance of self-doubt. And frequent, jarring shifts of tone, from evocative or witty lyric to prosaic self-doubt or mystic meditation, disrupt the poem's aspirations to formal unity. The poem has several voices.

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This proposition—that the *Quartets* contain several distinct voices—is unsurprising; they are obvious successors to those in *The Waste Land,* which was famously almost titled "He Do the Police in Different Voices." Hugh Kenner found four voices, the "lyric, didactic, colloquial, and deliberative" (261), introduced in "East Coker" as those of "the inhabitant of England, with a family, a past, and a penchant for visiting significant landscapes; the lyric poet; the sombre moralist, intermittently Christian; and the man of letters, 'trying to learn to use words.'" We might wish to inflect Kenner's division of voices somewhat differently: the separateness of the "deliberative" and "didactic" voices is not always certain, and the "colloquial" flavor is not so much deployed on its own as briefly used to soften the preceding two. But his basic terms remain convincing. Kenner rightly insists on the *Quartets'* effacement of any unitary authoritative voice; the text may have a figural relation to the "Invisible Poet," but it does not speak for him directly. The poem uses anonymity as a "self-sustaining technique" (251), as the "indispensable condition" of its existence. There is no obvious textual justification that would cement the identity of any the poem's voices or modes with each other, nor with Eliot.

Yet much of the existing criticism has attempted to unify the *Quartets'* diffuse voices, reading them as aspects of a single narrator. One critic proposes that the poem uses a "stream-of-consciousness method . . . though *whose consciousness* is a crucial question," and that "in the late poetry the consciousness is clearly Eliot's" (Hay 161). Even a more cautious reading of the poem as dramatic monologue easily falls into personalizing "the poet as a protagonist" in order, in reading, to "participate in his struggle" (Thompson 83); the work of criticism, then, is "to reintegrate the poet's sensibility by finding, largely by a labor of intelligence, a formula that sets down all he feels" (85). From here it is a short step to reading the *Quartets* in their entirety as a kind of doctrine: Eliot's personal theology.[4] The interpretive task, then, would no longer be the close reading of the poem so much as the explication and expansion of the doctrine. But to take the *Quartets* as describing a "spiritual discipline" of "the poet's way intersecting with a higher way" (Hay 172) is to forget that this is, first and foremost, a poem (and not, at least not necessarily or self-evidently, "a dogmatic poem in an age hostile to dogma" [Donoghue, "New Reading" 212]).[5] Treading more carefully, one might look for argument rather than doctrine in the poem, as Denis Donoghue does in comparing Eliot's conceptual poetry to Empson's program for an "argufying" poetry.[6] But

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this still produces a reading unduly swayed by the poem's own aspiration to a single voice and an argument like that of discursive prose.

Eliot himself was apparently not averse to a univocal, transparent reading of the *Quartets,* on Helen Gardner's account:

> In speaking of [*Four Quartets*] he never employed the defensive irony that marks so many of his references to *The Waste Land.* He never suggested that he did not himself know "what he meant" and that a reader's guess was as good as the author's. If asked to explain a reference he did so. (3)

Gardner then quotes Eliot in an interview, saying that the "obscurity" of *The Waste Land* was a product of his "learning how to use language. You have to say the thing the difficult way. . . . In *The Waste Land,* I wasn't even bothering whether I understood what I was saying" (4). Surprisingly, Eliot's offhand dismissal here of the poem generally considered his greatest work has attracted little comment, though it is just as obviously a stance "defensive" of the poet's desired reading as his earlier refusals to comment. Eliot insists that the *Four Quartets* are straightforward, told in the simplest language possible, "like conversing with your reader. . . . Sometimes the thing I am trying to say, the subject matter, may be difficult, but it seems to me that I am saying it in a simpler way" (4). It hardly seems necessary—except in view of the perhaps unreasonable privilege accorded to Eliot as commentator on his own work—to point out the tendentiousness of this claim, considering the enormous critical energy that has since been expended on unpacking the alleged simplicity of the poem's form. The complex development of the *Quartets'* themes and imagery in their repeated five-part form has been thoroughly described;[7] but a residual trace of Eliot's faux-naïf attitude still appears in our willingness to believe his account of the poem's discursive passages, as though the last poem by this past master of evasion and disguise could be a simple, direct address to his reader.

Eliot's claim that the *Quartets* are "conversing" with the reader might be more tenable if the poem had the dominating first-person voice of a dramatic monologue.[8] First-person narration does take on considerably more weight in the *Quartets'* progression from "Burnt Norton" through "Little Gidding," but there is no textual reason to see this as the emergence of *the* voice of the poet (or even of the poem). In "Burnt Norton" the later *Quartets'* equivocating "I" makes its appearance in only two lines:

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"I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where. / And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time" (68–69); here as elsewhere, the "I" exists as a method of breaking out of the poem's narrative progression, a way of arresting the poem's flow long enough to inject doubt about what can be said. The "I" calls into question the capacity of language, the ability of the poem to contain its meaning. In "East Coker" the mystical "I said to my soul, be still" (112, 123) is placed near enough to the equivocating "one" of part 2's "It was not (to start again) what one had expected" (72) and the uncertain "I" of part 3's "You say I am repeating / Something I have said before" (133–34) that the poem's formal doubt begins to infect the transcendent sureties of the mystical paradox. The first person is a strong link here between the paradoxes proffered by the spiritual voice ("Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought: / So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing" [127–28]) and those of the poem's performed self-doubt and doubt of language ("That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory" [68]); the poem, clearly enough concerned with the possibility of deriving spiritual insight from apparent paradox of meaning, deals just as much with the possibility of its own self-contradictory poetry. The "deliberative" and "didactic" voices, those of "the sombre moralist" and "the man of letters," cross each other here, polluting each other by proximity. The narration of "The Dry Salvages," as Kenner perceived (267), is framed from the outset as personal opinion: "I do not know much about gods" (DS 1); "I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant" (124). The repetitive uncertainty of this narrator comes to infect the motif of intergenerational memory that was first offered in "Burnt Norton" without a trace of a speaking voice: "I have said before" (96), "not forgetting / Something that is probably quite ineffable" (99–100). Here the "I" is just one of the equivocating "lecture-stigmata" that Eliot's editor Geoffrey Faber criticized (Gardner 133), adulterating passages that might otherwise have a more visceral power. But clearly this was not the only desired effect, as the poem's equivocation and self-criticism do not cease. The encounter with the "familiar compound ghost" (95) of "Little Gidding" is recounted in the first person, though this "I" is introduced gently, after eight impersonal lines that serve to introduce the bleak setting and Dantesque line separately from the complication of the narrator (86). And this narrator is also the ghost with whom he speaks (assuming a "double part" [97]); nevertheless, this passage is unlike any other section of the *Quartets* for its reliance on character and dialogue

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rather than an austere poetic voice with an effaced speaker. The *Quartets* do, then, rely increasingly on the first-person singular as they progress; but their "I" serves so often as a marker of equivocation, a discomfort of the poem with itself, that there can be no question of reading it as the single discursive voice of the poem.[9] This performance of self-doubt casts doubt upon the simpleness of the poem's supposedly "simpler way" of diction elsewhere, as well. In fact, far from unifying its voice and its argument, the "I" of the poem's obsessive self-interpretation infects the whole text with the self-reflexive uncertainty of reading.

Leaving aside the identity of the poem's discursive voice, then, we might still investigate what it says, and how. There is no obvious reason that a discursive poetry, one concerned with concepts, contradictions, and self-doubt, should be simpler, more direct, or more prosaic than one of image. The cluster of paradoxes around the poem's key terms (dance and still point; time and memory; future, past, and now; and so on) ceaselessly disrupt the poem's aspirations to unity of concept in just the same way as its self-doubting equivocations and jarring shifts of tone (from evocative or witty lyric to prosaic address) disrupt its unity of voice: both proclaim that the truth of the poem can only be approached through the endless betrayal of its poetry. This text is resolutely literary. And it is so in a mode that might even be called theoretical, in the sense developed by Paul de Man: the poem, contradicting itself constantly, proclaiming as a poem that "poetry does not matter," provides "negative knowledge about the reliability of linguistic utterance" (10) for its conceptual or spiritual purposes. The simply doctrinal reading of the *Four Quartets* is easy to recognize in de Man's description of "ideological" readings. As he describes, it mistakes the substance of poetry for the substance of belief:

> It would be unfortunate, for example, to confuse the materiality of the signifier with the materiality of what it signifies. This may seem obvious enough on the level of light and sound, . . . no one in his right mind will try to grow grapes by the luminosity of the word "day," but it is very difficult not to conceive the patterns of one's past and future existence as in accordance with temporal and spatial schemes that belong to fictional narratives and not to the world. This does not mean that fictional narratives are not part of the world and of reality; their impact upon the world may well be all too strong for comfort. What we call ide-

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> ology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism. (11)

The *Four Quartets* bear explicitly and constantly on this problem. What has generally been described as conceptual about the work, and what de Man here calls "very difficult," is the attempt to use the "shabby equipment" (EC 180) of language itself to get outside linguistic fictions about time. Following de Man (and despite his own characterization of Eliot as the paragon of the New Criticism's antitheoretical outlook), we might, then, describe the particular difficulty of the poem's discursive voices as theoretical:[10] not purely philosophical in the sense of ontology or theology, for it is resolutely textual and performative, but having to do with the possibility of a poetry about philosophical concerns. From beginning to end, the *Four Quartets* turn poetry against itself, in an endlessly frustrated attempt to gesture beyond it to the wordless truth that is the poem's desire (or perhaps rather its "love beyond desire"). In de Man's discussion as in the *Four Quartets,* this "very difficult" need for a nonideological objectivity, for thought beyond the "confusion" of language, is set out negatively: "not to conceive the patterns of one's past and future existence as in accordance with . . . fictional narratives and not . . . the world." The poem's negative theology is not separable from its negative poetics.

The *Quartets* give not just negative definition but name to the escape they seek from linguistic constraint. The "time" of the *Four Quartets* is always within language; it is the time of "fictional narratives and not . . . the world" (though the "world" of the poem is also aligned with the fallen realm of words) in which "Time past and time future / Allow but a little consciousness" (BN 83–84). A "consciousness" outside of time, or of the timeless from within time, a consciousness "as enveloping and undiscussable as the Bradleyan 'immediate experience'" (Kenner 255), is one description for the subject of the *Quartets.* And to discuss this "undiscussable," to approach it by the indirection of poetic form, is the *Quartets'* sole purpose, as the conclusion to "The Dry Salvages" makes clear:

> Here the impossible union
> Of spheres of existence is actual,
> Here the past and future
> Are conquered, and reconciled (216–19)

There is a measure of positive success that outstrips de Man's scrupulously

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negative project here, in the poem's mere act of laying out the paradox that names its goal. The repeated "Here" must be taken as a literal self-reference—"here, in these lines, the impossible is actual, the past and future reconciled"—though it is also a reference to the preceding "In-carnation" (215), which may itself refer to the poem's textual incarnation of its elusive meaning. The poem is pulling its "undiscussable" goal closer, into its own discussion, reaching "into the silence" (BN 140) with its own words. It is attempting to induce, to enact, the state of consciousness of the timeless that it discusses; thus, perhaps, the frequent critical willingness to quote the crucial lines without any comment.[11] But simply to quote "To be conscious is not to be in time" (BN 85) does not aid a reading of the poem's "consciousness," because it does not do justice to the words' indirection: even this apparently pivotal line can be understood in at least three distinct ways. It can mean that a truly mystical consciousness, once attained, allows the mystic an extratemporal vantage point (this may be the most obvious reading in the context of the whole body of the *Quartets*). But it can just as well be taken to say that every person's consciousness already contains an element of awareness of the timeless, though it lives inside the temporality of our lives (this reading is more salient in the context of the preceding lines, "Time past and time future / Allow but a little consciousness"—this "little" may be all we can aspire to). Or it can mean that human thought is only possible within time, and so to be conscious is always to die (*not to be,* in time), presaged by the earlier reference to "heaven and damnation / Which flesh cannot endure" (81–82). All of these meanings must be held at once: the poem is manifestly about the saint's mystical experience, but also about the "temporary translation of that beatitude into . . . a mode of experience available to human kind" (Kenner 270); and there is no need for psychoanalysis to read the preoccupation with death into this poem, which asserts "Every poem an epitaph" (LG 225). The apparent conversational directness of the statement only masks more linguistic ambiguity (or we might call it more poetry) shrouding the *Quartets'* argument.

The *Quartets* have many names for their mystical goal of knowledge outside language—"still point," "pattern," "love," "consciousness"—but all these share the paradoxical need to use language in order to get at this goal outside it, making their glimpses of redemption more doubt-tinged than self-assured. In "Burnt Norton" the redemptive power of language and the frustration with language are both staged at once:

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> Words move, music moves
> Only in time; but that which is only living
> Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
> Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
> Can words or music reach
> The stillness
> .....
> Words strain,
> Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
> Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
> Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
> Will not stay still. (137–42, 149–53)

This is not only an abstract discussion but also a self-description. The "burden" of meaning is great enough to strain poetry to the breaking point, and this poem itself may be cracked and broken, but some remainder is left after the death of the poem. The "form, the pattern" of the poetic text reaches beyond the transience of speech; but in reading it is not "still," its meaning escapes it and cannot be completely controlled. The poem's "reach / Into the silence" may exceed its grasp. These passages on the hope and futility of words, as well as any in the *Quartets,* exemplify both the text's self-justification and its self-criticism. For if "Burnt Norton" is "one of the great defenses of poetry in the English language" (Thompson 81), in its hope that words can, through form, "reach / The stillness" and thus be redeemed, then in its own form and content it is equally an *attack* on poetry, whose words "Will not stay still." This poem is not simply a "defense," nor primarily an argument; though among its voices there is surely room for the didactic, the poem's abiding doubt about the very possibility of its own success absolutely precludes the triumphal tone of a successful defense attorney.

That is, if the poem does approach the mystical "still point" that it seeks, this point is always "still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings" (EC 70–71). The crucial ambiguity of this "still" has gone seemingly unremarked in criticism—again, perhaps on account of the seduction of the discursive or antipoetic passages, which are generally treated inattentively, almost as though the poem bore appendages of critical prose (as they feign to be). But this "still" is not simply prosaic and cannot only mean *yet;* it is also another description of the center of the

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dance, the "still point of the turning world," and so it leaves the poem's "consciousness" more within than outside language, forcing it toward a performative meaning rather than an unapproachable mysticism. The poem's performance of direct, honest self-doubt, of the "wrestle / With words and meanings," brings the performance of its lyricism and its mystical surety more clearly into the realm of words as well.

With this performance comes the risk of parody. Once we accept the *Quartets* as many-voiced and irreducible to an argument beyond the words, the humorous obtrusion of its mannered language, and the unwanted foregrounding of form, may compromise the most religiously serious, mystically revelatory passages. As we've seen, the constant self-defeat of the *Quartets'* form for some commentators precludes even calling this text poetry. Once it is admitted to the realm of poetry, the next concern is that it might be self-parody. This charge is not only manifest in condemnations of the poem: it is an abiding concern, for readers defensive of the *Quartets,* that the text's moral seriousness be protected. Two critical discussions have offered a focus for this anxiety: Hugh Kenner's argument that the *Quartets'* form proposes an opposition to which it always offers a false reconciliation before the true one (256) (which invites anxiety about just where the false parts begin and end); and Donald Davie's extension of this view to the overall structure of the *Quartets* themselves (161), so that "The Dry Salvages" may be seen as having struck a deliberately false note. Denis Donoghue responds with a defense of Eliot's moral seriousness. For him, such an argument eventually

> implies, of course, that everything leading up to the last section of "Little Gidding" from the first words of "Burnt Norton" is, more or less, parody; the disclosure of moral positions which Eliot—the suggestion runs—has never inhabited or from which he has detached himself. . . . This is hard to take. I cannot believe that when the voice of "East Coker" II says
>
> > The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
> > Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless
>
> we are to interpret this as yet another moment in which the mind responsible for its existence is deceiving itself.
> ("New Reading" 227)

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But even if the poem is "more or less" parody, some passages might still appear, or be, quite serious; and even as Donoghue suggests that Eliot does "inhabit" the poem's "moral positions," he evicts the poet from their premises, arguing that the poem's chief concern is to "evacuate . . . the areas in which [its] readers live" (231), to "clear a space, or if necessary to take over a bombed-out area, and there to build a new life of the spirit" (232).[12] The vacillation of Donoghue's own identification of the poem's voice (shifting from "Eliot" to "the voice of 'East Coker' II" to "the mind" in the span of a few sentences) can even be taken as strong evidence of such an "evacuation." "Hard to take" it may well be, and more so if one insists on understanding it as pure sincerity; but this near-parodic "detachment," by means of shifting voice, from any single "moral position" is an apt description of the particular difficulty of reading the *Four Quartets*. The defense against parody is a concern that one voice of the poem might contaminate another; that the "sombre moralist" might be too affected by the false reconciliations of "the man of letters." For if the false reconciliation that parodies the true one, the proposal of the too-easy solution in order to dismiss it, is admitted to be part of the *Quartets* (as it must be), a defender of the poem's moral seriousness is faced with the nearly intractable problem of drawing boundaries in order to contain the threat of parody.

But to call the *Quartets* self-parody is not to condemn them through and through. To do so would rely on the premise that the text was intended purely seriously, in high moral sincerity, and had nothing else to offer. But the poem's sincerity may be as much a "detachable manner" as its paradox and self-questioning.[13] Its deadly earnest can be read as performance, for the appearance of sincerity may be the last refuge of the insincere, the bare face the last mask of the actor. Its apparent discursive artlessness is achieved by extreme artifice.[14] As we have seen, Eliot's artifice even extended to his extratextual claims about the poem, asserting a simplicity belied by his own technique. The direct sincerity of the *Quartets* is just as constructed as the characters, masks, and discontinuous styles that the poet purportedly laid aside; in fact, we might see this sincerity as the evolution, not the end, of Eliot's poetry of self-effacement and disguise. The charge of self-parody need not be feared; the *Quartets* may even be richer in meaning when charged with the play of language and voice, as they self-critically demand, than when insistently treated with moralistic straightforwardness.[15] Indeed, the critical essay that has inspired the most

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defensive reaction from the poem's moralizing readers,[16] Donald Davie's "T. S. Eliot: The End of an Era," is among the readings of the *Quartets* most sensitive to its continued use of voices and masks (always including the mask of "T. S. Eliot," the great poet purportedly dropping pretense and style for a moment and addressing the reader, or the poem itself, directly). Where Kenner sees in "The Dry Salvages" and its "cumbrous" diction "enough detachable mannerisms to have permitted the only successful parody of an Eliot manner, Henry Reed's *Chard Whitlow*" (268), Davie insists that the poem's apparent lead-footedness and inarticulacy are not a detachable failure but an inherent necessity:

> It is hardly too much to say that the whole of this third quartet is spoken by a nameless persona; certainly it is spoken through a mask, spoken *in character*. . . . It is thus that the incompetence turns out to be dazzling virtuosity; . . . [leading to the insistence] that all varieties of human folly and imperfection are the conditions for apprehending perfection. . . . What kind of poetry is this, in which loose and woolly incoherent language can be seen to be—in its place and for special purposes—better than clear and closely articulated language? (162)

The apparent inadequacy of technique (which is also among the poem's explicitly stated themes) is in fact a triumph of technique; the poem's self-parodic note is a deliberate, considered attack on its own poetry, on the inadequacy of form. It is no more incompetent than it must appear in order to demonstrate its necessary failure.

And its sometimes palpable vagueness is the only medium possible for a constant critique of its own desire for an impossible linguistic precision. It is both sincere and self-parodic—sincere in its self-criticism and parodic as a critique of its own sincerity.[17] The poetic persona of this mode is not nameless, though, for it pretends to be Eliot himself, conversing directly with his reader—and Eliot himself also occasionally pretended to be it. This is why the threat of parody is so potentially devastating: it cuts close to the heart of Eliot's own beliefs, endangering any reading that would like to find a positive doctrine at the center of the text. And so the poem's own self-critique, once elaborated by critics, has forced the poem's defenders into the position of proclaiming some sections of the *Quartets* simple failures rather than regarding the poem's self-defeat as mastery. In this they miss the reflexive, self-deprecating sense of "East Coker" 5:

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"every attempt / Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure" (174–75). For the *Four Quartets* themselves this is an ironic proclamation of virtue, a reminder that to achieve a wholly new kind of failure is in itself no bad thing, though one might want to remember to laugh about it.

The poem contains its own parody because its (still very serious) content deals with the inadequacy of poetry to its goal, with words that "Will not stay still" and a stillness that continues in the "intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings," because its wordless goal can only be approached through words. If "The Dry Salvages" is sometimes tiresome in its sermonizing,[18] this may just as well mean that the poem apprehends its own tendency to moralize ironically and self-critically as that it slips into an unintended, unironic moralist's tone. The poem continues to risk the use of cliché, but no easy escape into a somber sermon's vocabulary or tone is possible if its self-critical project is to succeed. It decenters all of its approaches to the unspeakable, rendering it vulnerable to a parody that it has always already included: for this poem, "the wrong note is the right note . . . the true key is never sounded, but exists in the poem only as the norm by which all the voices that speak are heard as delicately off-key, as the voices of parody" (Davie 164–67).

This makes the music of Eliot's *Quartets* sound like that of Adrian Leverkühn, embracing, though he ultimately finds it inadequate, the parodist's commitment to "heighten the play, by playing with forms out of which, as he well knew, life has disappeared" (Mann 241). It is easy to hear an echo of Leverkühn's music, achieved as parody within already obsolete forms, in the technique of the *Four Quartets*.[19] But we might wonder whether the normative "true key" that Davie imagined, which is absent from the poem except by negative implication, is so easily found.[20] We have already seen that the *Quartets* use parody not from a satirist's security of conviction but as a tool of rigorous self-criticism. But if the poem undermines all its certainties, this does not mean it is simply indeterminate. It only suggests that the poem's doctrine, if it has one, is a negative one, inseparable from the experience of reading it without any distortion of its own self-criticism. The poem's persistent self-parodic failings are the signature of its peculiar style, as well as a consequence of its autocritique.

The voice of parody is even apparent in "Little Gidding" 5, undercutting the claim to mastery in the cycle's apparently masterful completion:

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> And every phrase
> And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
> Taking its place to support the others,
> The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
> An easy commerce of the old and the new,
> The common word exact without vulgarity,
> The formal word precise but not pedantic,
> The complete consort dancing together)
> Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
> Every poem an epitaph. (216–25)

By the time the poem reaches this conclusion, it has violated each of these alleged principles of "right" language in turn. We might note first that this sentence itself is ponderous enough to need repetition of the subject after the long parenthetical digression, mimicking speech rather than "righting" writing. We have already seen how the poem "evacuates" its own meaning, preventing its words from being "at home" by paradox and parody; the diffidence of its discursive voice and the ostentation of its lyric passages are equally apparent. Rather than maintain "an easy commerce," the poem displays its old quotations' spelling in antiquarian fashion and leaves its Greek epigraph untranslated; it unquestionably deploys the "common" words "Dung and death" (EC 46) not just for their exactness but also for their visceral "vulgarity"; and we may take this catalog of language's failings, along with the Greek epigraph and the opening lecture on time, as evidence enough of the poem's occasional pedantry. And the list's form itself betrays the technique of the *Quartets:* rather than disjoining the identical ("fire or fire" [LG 213]), or insisting on implacable oppositions, the list repeatedly chooses one alternative over another ("exact without vulgarity," "precise but not pedantic") or breezily reconciles opposites by discarding or accepting both terms ("neither diffident nor ostentatious," "the old and the new"). It has precisely the manner of a false solution to a difficult problem—but its place in the poem is the conclusive location where a true reconciliation is expected. This catalog cannot help but be understood as a self-parody, an admission that the poem's own language is not "right" but, inevitably, wrong for its unspeakable content.

If this "delicately off-key" voice of parody is present throughout the *Quartets* and must be taken seriously, then we might also find serious meaning in Henry Reed's parody of the *Quartets,* which, jokingly,

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makes explicit an omnipresent theme: "As we get older we do not get any younger." "Chard Whitlow" was published in May 1941, before the composition of "Little Gidding" was far along, if it had even begun. While Kenner read it as a use of the "detachable mannerisms" of "The Dry Salvages," it contains none of that quartet's American imagery, and the title instead echoes "Burnt Norton." Instead of parodying the river imagery of "The Dry Salvages," this poem eerily anticipates "Little Gidding" and its finally explicit reference to times of war:

> There are certain precautions—though none of them very
> reliable—
> Against the blast from bombs, or the flying splinter,
> But not against the blast from Heaven, *vento dei venti,*
> The wind within a wind, unable to speak for wind;
> And the frigid burnings of purgatory will not be touched
> By any emollient.

Jon Stallworthy suggests in his introduction to Reed's *Collected Poems* that this satire may have influenced the composition of "Little Gidding" (xxiin). Without assessing the claim for direct influence, we can still remark on the coincidence: the preoccupation with death, and the *Quartets'* negative mysticism, must have partly emerged from or been amplified by the Second World War. Aside from the punch line, this passage can be read entirely seriously despite its tongue-in-cheek effusiveness, and it amplifies the themes of Eliot's poem as it echoes its manner. In this light the parody-voice of "Chard Whitlow" ends up appearing close to the *Quartets'* own self-deprecating parody. The silence of Reed's "listeners, / And you especially who have switched off the wireless" is very near to the silence of Eliot's prayer. Language itself, when not silent, is an unreliable, none too "certain" precaution; it cannot protect "against the blast from Heaven" or the cold, unspeaking wind of purgatory which the *Quartets* aim to approach or echo in their words. "The dove descending" of "Little Gidding" 4 might even be read as Eliot one-upping his parodist, for the bird of peace is a considerably more incongruous image of a dive-bomber than "the blast from Heaven" is of a falling bomb, yet this image, which a reader of "Chard Whitlow" can no longer take entirely seriously, opens the intensely serious, lyrical climax of the fourth section of the final quartet. The burning core of the *Quartets'* mystical encounter with redemption, the indistinguishable "choice of pyre or pyre" (LG 205) which offers no

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hope but renunciation, the resignation to no action that might bring salvation—the poem's closest approach to the Center it seeks—begins to seem faintly ridiculous, like a premature, Prufrockian renunciation of life in favor of some nebulous, half-joking "Love."

By now the gently insinuated contamination of parody has incurably infected the entire body of the poem, endangering even its desired final reconciliation, even the intensity of its lyric imagery. The poem's moral seriousness and its formal seriousness expose each other as imperfect. If we wish to continue to take this poem seriously, we must have a broader sense of its seriousness, one that never precludes the possibility of its laughing at itself. The risk of parody, if taken seriously, jeopardizes all the serious claims made by the moral and didactic discursive voice; meanwhile, this very voice's serious claims about the unreliability of language and the unspeakability of the poem's goal, if taken playfully, render all the poem's voices suspect as more masks of the ostentatiously invisible poet. The rigor of the *Four Quartets,* despite appearances, may be absolute; but it is a self-questioning, self-critical, self-parodic—in short, a completely reflexive—rigor. The poem need have no object other than itself, though it must continue to believe otherwise: it is a meditation on its own accomplished impossibility.

Notes

1. Parenthetical references to the *Four Quartets* abbreviate "Burnt Norton" to BN, "East Coker" to EC, "The Dry Salvages" to DS, and "Little Gidding" to LG; and give the line numbers.

2. A partial enumeration of these nonlyrical, discursive passages, highlighting those of particular length or interest, might include the opening meditation on time in "Burnt Norton" part 1, the second section of part 2, and the whole of part 5; the second section of "East Coker" 2, the later portion of 3, and the start of 5; the second section of "The Dry Salvages" 2, the introduction of Krishna in the first few lines of 3, and much of 5; the end of "Little Gidding" 1, the beginning and end passages of 3, and the whole of 5.

3. Much of the early critical response to the poem is conveniently available in Bergonzi, which includes a range of critical responses to the poem's discursive passages. The conceptual passages were heralded most generously as "highly abstract language, for the purpose, essentially, of putting forward and immediately rejecting ready-made concepts" (D. W. Harding 30). Conversely, they were

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dismissed as "attempts to break up [Eliot's] splendid incantations with passages of the prosiest of prose" ("Mr. T. S. Eliot's Confession" 34), leading to the conclusion that "[p]oetry is worn out," a relic, even an embalmed corpse. Karl Shapiro accused the *Quartets* of "the complete abandonment of poetry" (247), and Orwell insisted similarly: "Perhaps what we need is prayer, observance, etc., but you do not make a line of poetry by stringing those words together" (86). For a contemporary summary of the early responses to the *Quartets,* see Peter Monro Jack.

4. For example, Hay writes:

> *Four Quartets* begins with a reflective passage on actual time and memory, reminiscent of Augustine's opening in the *Confessions* and perhaps thus signaling that the poem is a real confession—a poet's memory of *his* "way." . . . [E]ach Quartet follows a visible path, and all paths lead to an answer that might be overwhelming if Eliot's whole poetic development had not prepared us for it. (166–70)

5. As Cleo McNelly Kearns puts it, the poem derives from a "wisdom tradition" of religious writing that

> tries to maintain a certain rhetoric of universality, which is not the same as a perennial philosophy or a reduction to a set of common propositions, though it is often weakly misread in that way.
> ("Doctrine and Wisdom" 209)

That is, it necessarily remains open to, and perhaps produces, a doctrinal misreading.

6. Donoghue writes:

> The problem differs from that of "argufying in poetry"—Empson's programme—because such argufying is content to take concepts as they come, and to engage in conversation with them. Quite a different matter [from the *Quartets'* creation of new concepts].
> ("On 'Burnt Norton'" 19)

7. The most exhaustive such discussion is Claudia Delank's *Die Struktur des Zyklus* Four Quartets *von T. S. Eliot.* Kenner and several other critics give shorter accounts of the structure of the *Quartets.*

8. For a detailed account of dramatic monologue in Eliot's poetry, see Riquelme's survey of the criticism (320–25n1).

9. Geoffrey Hill describes a similar problem of voice in the poem's use of the second person. Hill, though, judges the unsettledness of the poem's voice more

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muddled than considered, not the "deliberated indeterminacy of pitch" that he finds in Eliot's earlier work but rather a merely tonal "semantic equivalent of *tinnitus aurium*" (157).

10. John Paul Riquelme has argued similarly that "Eliot is a precursor, albeit an unlikely one, for theorists such as Paul de Man. . . . the supposedly logocentric Eliot developed ideas whose presuppositions and implications are far from logocentric" (37–38). And other critics such as Spanos and Kearns have seen similarities between Eliot's poetic technique and deconstruction. Most such discussions have focused on Eliot's criticism rather than his poetry.

11. For example: this "paradox . . . is the new discovery of this part of the poem. 'To be conscious is not to be in time.' Yes, perhaps; but, on the other hand, 'Only through time time is conquered'" (Traversi 114).

12. Donoghue's compelling account of Eliot's "evacuation" of his cultural landscape in order to repopulate it—framed in explicit reference to a bombed-out 1940s London—is strikingly close to Michael Levenson's recent description of the work of *The Waste Land:* "the poem devastates the urban vortex of sex, money and J. C. Squire, and it compensates with Dante, Tennyson, Kyd. It enacts a depletion of social life and a saturation of cultural life" (11).

13. Or the two may be the same: in William V. Spanos's reading, the poem's self-parodying strain grows from "Eliot's awareness of the obsoleteness of the poetic modality he uses" (551n50).

14. For Kenner the *Quartets* represent the final disappearance of the problem of voice from Eliot's poetry:

> [I]t is Old Possum's last disappearing-trick. No *persona,* Prufrock, Gerontion, Tiresias or the Magus, is any longer needed. . . . [Eliot] had employed masks, he had employed styles; he had manipulated ventriloqually the effects of respected poets; in *Ash-Wednesday* he had allowed a discontinuous *poésie pure* to imply a moving zone of consciousness. In *Ash-Wednesday* the relation between speaker and reader—indeed the speaker's very mode of existence—is made to seem artless by an extreme of artifice . . . In *Burnt Norton* such problems are not so much solved as caused to vanish. (250–51)

The conclusion that the problem of voice "vanishes" in the *Quartets* has proven unduly optimistic, given the continued critical concern with questions of by whom and in what mode the *Quartets* are narrated; indeed, the description of *Ash-Wednesday*'s artifice of apparent artlessness is more than applicable to the *Quartets'* discursive voices.

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15. A few readers, such as Cleo McNelly Kearns, have recognized the omnipresent possibility of parody as a necessary risk of the poem:

> There is no discourse in *Four Quartets,* however elevated, or indeed however self-protectingly flat, prosaic, precise and cautious, that can be guaranteed against reduction to a mocking literary imitation. ("Negative Theology" 148)

16. Such as Donoghue quoted above and Gardner 4n4.

17. While Davie confined his argument about parody to "The Dry Salvages" (wishing to argue for the purposefulness of its sometimes awkward diction), the remainder of this essay extends the parodic reading across all four *Quartets.*

18. There are certainly both trite and moralistic moments in "The Dry Salvages," like the phrase "prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action" (212) about which Orwell complained. Kenner, recognizing it as parody rather than a lapse of judgment, called this "the parody-reconciliation, the collective voice of the nineteenth century . . . some ideal Matthew Arnold's road out of East Coker" (271).

19. Indeed, we might also find a touch of the exaggerated (even parodic!) seriousness of the biographer Serenus Zeitblom—and his eventual confession, "I have always feared Adrian's proneness to laughter" (Mann 378)—in readers whose insistence on seriousness resists the parodic notes in Eliot. (I am indebted to Michael Wood for alerting me to the similarity between the artistic personae of Eliot and Leverkühn, which is also discussed by Harvey Gross [109–12] and James Martin Harding [92]).

20. If Eliot's use of parody is like Leverkühn's, this comparison might point toward a revision of the common conception of Eliot as emblematic of high modernism's sincere ambition. After all, Fredric Jameson has taken Leverkühn's parodic composition as the model of pastiche,

> where the norm itself is eclipsed . . . the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry . . . devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. (17)

In this light, perhaps we can begin to see the lateness of the *Quartets'* late style as less like Beethoven's (as the final poetic work of an individual master's career), and more like Stravinsky's or Leverkühn's (as a form of late modernist or

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proto-postmodernist pastiche, pervaded by an irony that compromises even the possibility of the author's own belief).

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"Thinking Strictly Prohibited": Music, Language, and Thought in "Sirens"

Stuart Allen

Taking their cue from the novelist's comments to Frank Budgen that he composed "Sirens" using "the technical resources of music" (Ellmann 459), many theorist-critics have written about "musicality" in Joyce. These writers locate in "musical" feeling and sensuality a resistance to the incursions of a rationality they identify as, among other things, aggressive and abstract to the point of being barren. Viewing thought as the enemy, they seek to purge this oppressive spirit with the supposedly nonrational "musical" matter they would thereby free. As a consequence, discussions initially concerned with something like Joyce's prosody quickly tend to focus on political and philosophical questions, particularly those associated with desire.[1] The deadly prose of the mind, the argument goes, is countered by the poetic or "musical" body.

In what follows, I consider the idea of musical language in the "Sirens" episode of *Ulysses,* not in order to cloak a tangential discussion of the body, the porous self, or textual subversion, but to think through the significance of the resemblance between music and language and to identify why critics have found it almost impossible keep this topic in view.[2] It is my contention that rather than rout critical intelligence, musicality in *Ulysses* allows readers to experience one of music's most striking effects—distraction. With the help of Theodor Adorno's aesthetics, particularly "Music and Language: A Fragment," I address the question of the standoff between art (defined as seduction, destruction, and falsehood) and reason (constructed as disinterestedness, preservation, and truth). I argue that musical mimesis does not just undermine thinking but is a kind of thinking itself. In this way I hope to restore to "Sirens" a cognitive content

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overlooked by much of the Joyce criticism that takes sensuality to be the adversary of a reason it consistently posits as wicked. I propose that the very separation of art (mimesis/sensuality) and philosophy (cognition/identification) produces the undesirable—that is, crude, distorting, and damaging—aspects of reason that poststructuralist and historicist critics contest.[3] However, it is not my goal to diminish the importance of the mimetic element in art. Neither subsuming art beneath (Adorno's) philosophy nor dismissing it as mere decoration, I consider the political implications of Joyce's mediation of the rational through the sensual, the sensual through the rational.

Derek Attridge takes Joyce's experiments with syntax in "Sirens" as music making in a literal sense. But emptying the idea of musicality into the post-Saussurean model of language to which he is committed, Attridge soon gets distracted from the question of music that motivates his discussion. He argues that by reviving the dormant prosody of prose, fearless of both unintelligibility and a short-circuiting of information transfer, Joyce "liberates the body from a dictatorial and englobing will, and allows its organs their own energies and proclivities" (61). The study of musicality falls by the wayside as classical poststructuralist concerns such as a thematics of the breached subject take center stage.

Attridge's observations about language and the rampant autonomy of fetishised body parts in "Sirens" are extremely provocative, and represent a major contribution to the literature on *Ulysses*. Nevertheless, his analysis of the body soon also forgets its linguistic ground (a ground that he reminds us is long forgetful of its musical impulse) and develops into a sketch of a progressive politics driven by liberated sexuality. The release of the body from the tyranny of the mind, Attridge claims, unleashes sexuality against repressive morality.

Its utopian politics are not the only problem with this approach. When Attridge actually describes sexuality, he reveals a major weakness with the Anglo-American reception of French theory, or perhaps with the theory itself: "sexuality thrives on the separation of the body into separate parts, while a sexually repressive morality insists on the wholeness and singleness of body and mind (or soul)" (62). Defining desire as a process of "displacement, decentering, and exchange" (64), Attridge renders it commensurable with capitalist exchange equivalence—the law of infinite substitution—and its secret theology of commodity fetishism.[4] Furthermore, although rooted in poststructuralist linguistics, Attridge's thinking

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is also dependent on a rhetoric that ultimately promotes liberal capitalism as the revolutionary energy to overthrow the prohibitions of a tyrannical moral rule. Few would deny the iconoclastic and productive genius of capitalism—certainly not Marx—but Attridge thus implies that the morality he wishes to see vanquished is easily separated from the linguistic and bodily capitalism he advocates. To try to clearly separate religion and politics is a formidable task, and there are those who hold that the Irish Catholic Church (the sponsor of the codes Attridge opposes) attempted to maintain its influence by frequently colluding with its imperial, capitalist master.[5]

Significantly, the way critical attention wanders from a discussion of the relationship between music and language in "Sirens" to other themes mimics the distraction experienced by the characters in the chapter. As Mark Currie points out, Joyce's deconstructive readers seem willingly to accept Derrida's claim that "Everything we can say about *Ulysses* has already been anticipated" (qtd. in Currie 259). It is almost as if philosophically inclined Joyceans willingly let themselves perform Joyce's text.

If poststructuralist criticism's political yearnings somewhat obscure Joyce's experiments with music in "Sirens" and elsewhere, it might have been hoped that the more nuanced politics of the materialist work that came to prominence in the 1990s, as high theory waned, might offer a more satisfactory take on the musicality of *Ulysses*. Frequently, political criticism, unimpressed by poststructuralism's indeterminate version of radical politics, risks a "vulgar" Marxist, antiaesthetic position that neglects form as an object of serious enquiry.[6] Seamus Deane, for instance, argues that the "fine writing" Joyce employs from "The Dead" onward represents a "lyrical" mystification of history and politics (34). Luxuriating in the sumptuousness of the autonomous artwork, Joyce's writing loses its critical teeth. Even Emer Nolan, in her attempt to counter the "lofty indifference to cultural or political specificity" (9) found in the writings of theoretical Joyceans, often makes assumptions similar to those that underpin the critical work she questions. Nolan's inspired antiuniversalism places such importance on the material(ity) from which Joyce constitutes his writing that she seems to approve what Wyndham Lewis objected to in 1927 as the "very nightmare of the naturalistic method . . . a glut . . . of matter" (89). Like the theoreticians she criticizes, Nolan privileges the sensual over the analytical, thereby pre-empting discussion of their productive entanglement.

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However, *Ulysses* does not simply stage the defeat of the mind by the body, according to Nolan. Instead, "Sirens" implies that Bloom is aware of the extent to which he is part of the very scene he surveys. Nevertheless, although Nolan's reading of "Sirens" is undeniably groundbreaking and responsive to formal nuance, and certainly aids my own, she says little about musicality per se in Joyce. She regards Joyce as the perfect looking glass, able to recognize and then portray the full spectrum of political views available to his age. Inevitably, this emphasis on the reflective, mimetic quality of Joyce underplays the importance of the conceptual dimension of the writing and the place of the not-yet-thought in *Ulysses*—what Adorno defines as art's ability to "signal the possibility of the nonexisting" (*Aesthetic Theory* 132).

"Sirens" and seduction

It is difficult to pinpoint the dominant theme of "Sirens," largely because Joyce so relentlessly elaborates the "musical variations" available to him. Still, a principle interest of the chapter concerns the sexual power that women have over men. The episode recounts the events that occur when Bloom follows Blazes Boylan (on his way to a tryst with Molly) into the Ormond Hotel and has lunch in the restaurant with Richie Goulding. There Bloom listens to the singing, with piano accompaniment, of Simon Dedalus, Bob Cowley, and Ben Dollard in the bar. But the chapter opens with the two barmaids who work there—Miss Douce and Miss Kennedy.

From the outset, their physical presence is stressed:

> Miss Kennedy sauntered sadly from bright light, twining a loose hair behind an ear. Sauntering sadly, twining a loose hair, she twisted twined a hair. Sadly she twined in sauntering gold hair behind a curving ear. (331)

Critics often cite this passage as an example of language becoming music in "Sirens."[7] The repetition, syntactic inversions, permutations, and thoroughgoing verbal playfulness seem to emancipate writing from referentiality. At the same time, though, the sensual extravagance of the prose also conveys the languid beauty of Miss Kennedy. In "Sirens" it is undecidable to what extent the language responds to itself or to its subject. Either way, the sensual characteristic of musical language appears dominant: representational, it is mimetic; liberated, it is a kind of automimetic frottage.

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As discussed above, some critics identify this "language of flow" (*Ulysses* 339) as the text's resistance to totalizing discourse—its will to freedom, in a sense. However, the chapter is less a straightforward celebration of linguistic anarchy than a careful meditation on the limits and consequences of language's musicality. For Adorno, who like Joyce was greatly interested in the artistic innovations of Arnold Schoenberg,[8] the significance of the new music's departure from tonality is that it thereby reveals a kind of thought more commonly associated with language. Tonality's

> unchanging identity has become sedimented like a second nature. This is why consciousness finds it so hard to bid farewell to tonality. But the new music rises up in rebellion against the illusion implicit in such a second nature. It dismisses as mechanical these congealed formulae and their function.
>
> ("Music and Language" 2)

Music is like language, according to Adorno, in that it is capable of critique. Schoenberg's criticism of the clichés of tonality reveals that musical "language," like other forms of language, has become reified, that the particular has been degraded "into a token, into the superannuated signifier of fossilized subjective meanings" (2). Adorno thus regards Schoenberg's music as a rational criticism of an aged or decayed musical rationality—a rationality that, no longer thinking, is simply the blind reproduction of mental tics.

Although Adorno is interested in music's cognitive aspect, for him it is neither simply rational nor purely aleatory:

> Music bereft of all intentionality, the merely phenomenal linking of sounds, would be an acoustic parallel to the kaleidoscope. On the other hand, as absolute intentionality it would cease to be music and would effect a false transformation into language. Intentions are central to music, but only intermittently. Music points to true language in the sense that content is apparent in it, but it does so at the cost of unambiguous meaning, which has migrated to the languages of intentionality. (3)

The interpretation of music "calls for imitation . . . not a deciphering process" (3). Music is like language, then, but only in the sense that it is a kind of arrested tongue. Employing a Kantian locution, Adorno proposes that

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"In contrast to philosophy and the sciences, which impart knowledge, the elements of art which come together for the purpose of knowledge never culminate in a decision" (4). The difference between aesthetic reason and "practical" or philosophical reason, then, is that art lacks rationality's ends.[9] Musical signifiers are not dissolved in their supposed signifieds. Instead, in a musical composition they are sent on "an odyssey of unending mediation" (4). Music exceeds the particular (in that it is capable of the abstraction of critique), but the sovereignty of process (the primacy of time in performance and the self-referentiality in a piece) means that the whole for which it strives can never shake off its constituent elements.

From the outset of "Sirens," the "liberal" ear that opposes the eye is linked with violence as much as with pleasure: "War! War! The tympanum. . . . Ah, lure! Alluring" (329). Battle cries and martial drums are just as likely, it seems, to herald a gruesome death as a deliciously erotic surrender. In the opening section of the episode, prayer (a kind of song, and very often sociable) brings solitary anger rather than shared joy: "Amen! He gnashed in fury" (330). No simple correlation exists between music, bliss, and the good.

Flirting with Miss Kennedy and Miss Douce, the Homeric sirens in this chapter, Simon Dedalus says: "That was exceedingly naughty of you . . . Tempting poor simple males" (335). The women embody the fusion of sensual pleasure, danger, and death in Homer. Often wise but also probably misogynistic, Bloom responds to the sexual mischievousness of the shop girl (another siren) who "winsomely" smiles at him when he buys "Two sheets cream vellum paper" (339): "Think you're the only pebble on the beach. Does that to all. For men." The barmaids hypnotize the drinkers in the bar, feigning the appearance of sexual interest as well as sometimes withholding any encouraging gaze.[10] Lenehan, for example, cannot get Miss Kennedy's attention, and labors to attract her: "No glance of Kennedy rewarding him he yet made overtures" (337). Soon afterward, he is at the mercy of Miss Douce as he watches her reach for a flagon on a high shelf: "—O! O! jerked Lenehan, gasping at each stretch. O!" (341). The lyrical Os set off an almost infinite dialectic of interpretation, suggesting as they do the seesaw of pain and pleasure; the closeness of lamentation and praise; the fullness, yet also world-annihilating emptiness, of the expressive self.[11]

It might be argued that Lenehan mistakes Miss Douce's wish to be admired (by Boylan, specifically) for his own desire—that, in effect, he

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enacts the desire of another.[12] The repeated mention of the mirror behind the bar certainly seems to confirm the importance of this kind of mimicry:

> He spellbound eyes went after her gliding head as it went down the bar by mirrors, gilded arch for ginger ale, hock and claret glasses shimmering, a spiky shell, where it concerted, mirrored, bronze with sunnier bronze. (343)

Even when Lenehan does eventually persuade Miss Douce to show some flesh, the fulfilment of his demand undermines his agency and will. He is transfixed by her garter play:

> bending, she nipped a peak of skirt above her knee. Delayed. Taunted them still, bending, suspending, with wilful eyes.
> —*sonnez!*
> Smack. She let free sudden in rebound her nipped elastic garter smackwarm against her smackable woman's warmhosed thigh. (343)

Although both characters appear to enjoy the floorshow, there is a strong suggestion of sadomasochism or perhaps plain violence in this otherwise comic incident. It is difficult to say for sure whether it is Miss Douce or Lenehan who is most at risk.[13] Whatever the case, the passage intimates that sensuality and mimicry are potentially hazardous.

In Homer it is not the physical beauty of the sirens that threatens to unseat Odysseus and his crew, but their song. Miss Kennedy and Miss Douce do not sing formally (although they shriek and laugh [333], giggle and yell [334], rhyme [335], sing snatches of song [336], clang the cash register [342], and snap stocking elastic [343]). Real singers, nevertheless, do inhabit the pub—namely Dedalus, Cowley, and Dollard. Does "Sirens," then, distinguish between the erotic and the aesthetic as sources of mimetic threat? The men in the bar discuss the sexual history and tastes of Molly Bloom, a well-known professional singer, talk that makes clear the chapter's association of music and sex. Speaking to Ben Dollard (described by Molly as blessed with a "bass barreltone voice" [194]), Simon Dedalus remarks smuttily, "Sure, you'd burst the tympanum of her ear, man, . . . with an organ like yours" (348). Bloom himself ponders that "Tenors get women by the score. Increase their flow" (353). It does appear that "Sirens" runs singing—or art itself—and sex together. Indeed, even making a generous allowance for boozy pub bravado, the violent image Dedalus

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uses magnifies an anxiety already signalled in the chapter about the balance of power in sexual relations between men and women.

Through Bloom, "Sirens" deepens its exploration of the connection between art and seduction. No performer himself, but an informed enthusiast who carries his learning with grace, Bloom listens to the singing and conversation, and mulls over the various functions of art. With a critical searchlight, he blasts the sentimental glow of Richie Goulding's reminiscence about Joe Maas's talent: "Coming out with a whopper now. Rhapsodies about damn all. Believes his own lies. Does really. Wonderful liar. But want a good memory" (351). Here Bloom suspects the integrity of such gossip about music. Yet when Simon Dedalus sings, everyone—Bloom included—falls into private reverie. People become flushed with emotion ("Braintipped, cheek touched with flame, they listened feeling that flow endearing flow over skin limbs human heart soul spine" [352]). Richie, Bloom, and the rest are, quite simply, mesmerized by the voice they hear:

> Through the hush of air a voice sang to them, low, not rain, not leaves in murmur, like no voice of strings of reeds or what doyoucallthem dulcimers, touching their still ears with words, still hearts of their each his remembered lives. Good, good to hear: sorrow from them each seemed to from both depart when first they heard. When first they saw, lost Richie, Poldy, mercy of beauty, heard from a person wouldn't expect it in the least, her first merciful lovesoft oftloved word. (353)

Song, in its beauty, contains a mercy, but also the *petit mort* of coitus, the loss of self to a kind of spell. And when Ben Dollard later sings "The Croppy Boy," the entire population of the bar swoons. Even the barmaids, surely inoculated by now, are moved: "Bronze, listening by the beerpull, gazed far away. Soulfully" (367). Bloom finds the lyrics speaking powerfully to him: "I too, last my race. Milly young student. Well, my fault perhaps. No son. Rudy. Too late now. Or if not? If not? If still?" (367). He speculates that all within hearing are thinking of their own mortality: "Thrill now. Pity they feel. To wipe away a tear for martyrs. For all things dying, want to, dying to, die. For that all things born" (369). Simon, too, tearfully trumps "compassion from foghorn nose" (371).

Dollard's singing sends Bloom spiralling into his own Proustian depths as he relives his first sexual encounters with Molly. So far does he

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descend, in fact, that it is difficult to assign ownership to the language here:

> Flood of warm jimjam lickitup secretness flowed to flow in music out, in desire, dark to lick flow, invading. Tipping her tepping her tapping her topping her. Tup. Pores to dilate dilating. Tup. The joy the feel the warm the. Tup. To pour o'er sluices pouring gushes. Flood, gush, flow, joygush, tupthrop. Now! Language of love. (354)

Despite his relatively cool report on music's influence over his companions, Bloom himself can't separate song from sex and self-evaporation: "Tenderness it welled: slow, swelling. Full it throbbed. That's the chat. Ha, give! Take! Throb, a throb, a pulsing proud erect" (354). Bloom's body seems to match the music's (erotic) crescendo, defeating any attempt at more gentlemanly and disinterested observation.

The Homeric dimension aside, music has become, for Bloom as well as the others in the bar, what Adorno calls "social cement"—an aural backdrop that acts now as a social lubricant, now as an aide-mémoire that fosters a sentimental (and, for Adorno, false) remembrance of things past in individuals or groups ("On Popular Music" 458). In much of "Sirens" music functions to distract individuals from their present selves, and thus from any attention to the music itself.

For Adorno, the main effect of this kind of nonexperience of music—generally associated with mass-produced music, as opposed to its genuinely popular manifestations—is political rather than psychological. He argues:

> Distraction is bound to the present mode of production, to the rationalized and mechanized process of labor to which, directly or indirectly, masses are subject. This mode of production, which engenders fears and anxiety about unemployment, loss of income, war, has its "nonproductive" correlate in entertainment; that is, relaxation which does not involve the effort of concentration at all. (458)

Undemanding, pop music distracts individuals from the strain of lives dominated by alienated labor and insecurity. Yet the bogus relaxation it induces through "patterned and pre-digested" (458) forms prevents the effort "of that participation . . . without which there can be no receptivity

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to art" and, it must be assumed, no aesthetically motivated will to beautify society—that is, to make life harmonious and just. Distraction and relaxation tie the consumers of popular music to the social and political nets beneath which they fret and, unknowingly, long to escape. In this classic "culture industry" argument, Adorno concludes that mass entertainment is fundamental to the reproduction of the capitalist lifeworld.

Bloom, song, and thinking

The pleasure induced by some kinds of music can be regarded simply as perilous or an opium of the people. It inveigles autonomy from listeners, distracts them from the present, and renders them vulnerable to manipulation. However, although music is so powerfully affecting in "Sirens"—capable of dethroning the mind through sheer force of matter—it is not witless. Adorno and Horkheimer argue:

> The Sirens' song has not yet been rendered powerless by reduction to the condition of art. They know "everything that ever happened on this so fruitful earth," including the events in which Odysseus himself took part, "all those things that Argos' sons and the Trojans suffered by the will of the gods on the plains of Troy." (32–33)

By the phrase "reduction to the condition of art," Adorno and Horkheimer intimate the idea of art as pure mimesis, its force entirely without thought. Thus "Sirens'" constellation of song, seduction, and distraction (or plain danger) can be read as an attempt to recognize the nonmimetic element that mimesis harbors. If art were purely mimetic, it would hold no fear. But acknowledging aesthetic agency implies that music might not simply mirror the world with glassy indifference as to its consequences. Art's apparent "activity" implies that it also knows something, that some kind of thought precedes its compelling, if apparently consciousness-erasing, activity.

For Adorno, a feature of the dialectic of enlightenment is the separation of cognition from mimesis, or philosophy from art. In order to dominate the objects it scrutinizes, philosophy must remain uninfluenced by them. As philosophy depends on language, it thus tries to present its discourse as stripped of a mimetic dimension: philosophy claims that its knowledge does not depend on representation.[14] It claims, then, to off-

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load the sensuality it wishes to escape onto literary language: constructing itself as cold rationality, it posits literature as unthinking, overheated, mimetic, and essentially decorative. In *Ulysses,* however, Bloom's observations about advertising question philosophy's narrative. Initially, he succumbs to the emotion roused by a poster: "Wise Bloom eyed on the door a poster, a swaying mermaid mid nice waves. Smoke mermaids, coolest whiff of all. Hair streaming. Lovelorn. For some man" (339). The generalized eroticism of the advertisement quickly evokes his angst about the meeting between Molly and Boylan and, to a lesser extent, his own "adulterous" correspondence under the signature Henry Flower. By "Cyclops," however, Bloom has developed an aesthetic theory of advertising copy ("for an advertisement you must have repetition. That's the whole secret" [419]). His sense of himself as an outsider detaches him from, and enables him to reflect upon, the seemingly dark workings of language vital to advertising's agenda.[15] An alienated observer, Bloom achieves some awareness of the machinations of affect. Affective language does not drown him in desire but reveals itself to him, thereby generating intellection, albeit at a low level. Of course, this embryonic understanding of the intentional patterning of affect does not free Bloom from its sway in "Sirens." By and large, the aesthete and lover outdoes the theoretician. Nevertheless, if the sensual speaks to the mental, *Ulysses* might suggest that music itself contains a cognitive element. Like language, music could have a double character.

Bloom holds out against the seduction that music, and by association poetic language, threatens. This is not to say, though, that he favors something akin to a bourgeois ideal of masculine self-restraint and politeness. He has no wish to prove himself invulnerable to the power of women by manfully wrestling down bodily impulses, no wish to distinguish himself from men who are prey to their coarser instincts;[16] his status as an alien may give him a knowledge that others lack, but he would still like to be less of a "foreigner." Enacting Adorno's notion of the aesthetic as a social critique of society,[17] Bloom peers beyond the inward results of the affects of music (and poetic language) to the original source of sensuality—the material world and the people in it: "Words? Music? No: it's what's behind" (354). But this is not an appeal to an idea of the real—that which supposedly precedes mediation. Sitting in another room, at a distance from the singers, he remarks that he can "still hear it better here than in the bar though farther." Art does not, at this moment, trouble his sovereign

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subjectivity. Despite appearing to be a reasonably self-possessed formalist, Bloom is actually a witness to the form feeling takes in social life. He regards music as a device that produces a maelstrom of aesthetic affects, and then reads music's manipulation of emotion and desire as a negative index of free human relationships and feelings. Through song's naked display of power—the seduction routine that stupefies everyone in its embrace—Bloom recognizes the bullying artifice, the commandment, that passes for natural and feeling relations. In essence, he discovers that society is what Adorno calls a second nature that, through the calculated application of the somatic, masquerades as first nature—as the only possible reality.

This, then, is the cognitive content that "Sirens" finds in musical mimesis: "It's in the silence you feel you hear. Vibrations. Now silent air" (357). The failure of the music sung in the bar to be an in-itself—its reduction to "social cement"—points Bloom toward the possibility of a music that could achieve self-identity, that might exist beyond the rubric of domination. In music's relative debasement in the Ormond Hotel bar, the dream of a mode of being that identity thinking cannot articulate is presented in silence, in the momentary pause of pseudomusic. Mired in second nature, subjects only hear what identity thinking permits to be heard. But Bloom finds a perspective on singing. Even when he is ravished by Simon's song and begins to sink into the treacly solipsism of the ersatz (and already privatized) sociability around him—

> It soared a bird, it held its flight, a swift pure cry, soar silver orb it leaped serene, speeding, sustaind, to come, don't spin it out too long long breath he breath long life, soaring high, high, resplendent, aflame, crowned, high in the effulgence symbolistic, high, of the ethereal bosom, high, of the high vast irradiation everywhere all soaring all around about the all, the endlessnessnessness . . .
> (355)

—he thinks, in the gaps opened by his ironic distance, relatively rationally about love, friendship, and community, a new kind of song in the "Language of love" (354):

> Siopold!
> Consumed.
> Come. Well sung. All clapped. She ought to. Come. To me, to him, to her, you too, me, us. (356)

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The generous spatial arrangement of the words and phrases that compose this passage implies that, even as Bloom is ravished, he retains enough distance to experience sensuality as communication between self and other. Alienated from the context, and thus the content, of the singing, he can see it as a socially damaged form. Rather than lead to the extinction of self, his access to mimesis leads him to thoughts of human relationships free of domination. Indeed, he seems able to rethink sexual and other relations less as a power struggle than as rich proximity. People can be reconciled without becoming the same. Thus, for all his distanced observation of the events around him, at no time does he become an ascetic. If he did, he would be little different from the watery-eyed drinkers in the bar. As Adorno and Horkheimer write, "Promiscuity and asceticism, excess and hunger, are directly identical, despite the antagonism, as powers of disintegration" (31). To either embrace oblivion in the sirens' song or stop one's ears with wax ultimately springs from the demonization of mimesis and all the hatred of flesh and anxiety about matter that follows.

Bloom pulls back from the fragmentation implicit in both alienated mastery and supersensual loss of self: he *thinks* mimesis. He listens to the mournful song:

> That voice was lamention. Calmer now. It's in the silence you feel you hear. Vibrations. Now silent air. . . . Let people get fond of each other: lure them on. Then tear asunder. Death. Explos. Knock on the head. (357)

Is the real in Joyce, then, not mother love, as Bloom once thought (33), but death? It may seem that once he finds a quiet place within the racket of second nature and sees past the false comfort of barroom companionship, Bloom fixes on death as Dublin's truth. But while song allows him to reflect (via mimesis) that a form of death is the condition of existence under second nature, it also enables him to read the same death dialectically as a critique of the death-in-life he sees around him. Death is something Bloom finds ready-made, and is not a beloved and ashen-breathed child of his brain. Music renders death a sensual concept (in other words, kinetic)—both a vision of society-as-it-is and its critique. Through song, Bloom looks forward to life: unlike his neighbors, he has no wish to cry in his beer.

Compare "Sirens" with Joyce's earliest sustained treatment of music, "The Dead." Distant music is the catalyst for both Gabriel and Gretta's

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epiphanies about their marriage (*Dubliners* 211), but while Gabriel's failure to respond to song suggests his condition of alienated and snobbish intellectualism, Gretta's total capitulation to the memories and feelings that "The Lass of Aughrim" evokes suggests that she is a prisoner of her emotions. As Allan Hepburn remarks, Gabriel, unable to experience D'Arcy's performance first hand, is fatally "cut off from [Gretta's] feelings of loss and grief" (201). Gabriel is a modern subject of reflection, split and estranged to such a degree that whenever he looks in a mirror he is puzzled by his expression (219). The intellect he holds so dear has radically failed him, and he discovers that he is a "ludicrous figure" (221).[18] While Gabriel's failure to respond to music discloses his rationality and alienation, musical enchantment deprives Gretta of reason. In effect, she is unconscious of the present, careless of the future, and hopelessly captive to the past. D'Arcy's song thus reveals in the couple's relationship an unresolved antagonism between thought and feeling. In this early story cognition and emotion do not communicate with each other.

If "The Dead" is characterized by stalemate, "Sirens" embodies a dialectical motion supervised by Bloom himself. As a result, little dialectical effort is required from the reader: the process is already at work in the text.[19] Through the distance imposed on him by his social status, Bloom experiences his own alienated distraction from the music he hears. He performs a dialectical phenomenology of listening: arresting the sonic world within which others dwell unawares, he gains understanding.[20] Yet, despite defamiliarizing the singing he hears, Bloom never extricates himself from the situation he observes. Instead, his thinking ear allows him to spread himself throughout the Ormond Bar. He is able to "have at a distance" (Merleau-Ponty 297) a multiplicity of sounds that would otherwise remain a muffled and unnoticed second nature. Through participation, Bloom discloses what Stephen later calls the "structural rhythm" (564) of his surroundings. This is the meaning of Bloom's "Pprrpffrrppfff" (376) at the end of the episode. Rather than demonstrating the body's rebellion against the mind, Bloom's transformation into an instrument reveals his inclusion in the material environment of social bodies he has brought to fresh consciousness. His knowledge of the affects generated by singing—the audience's sentimental distraction from the grain of a song into lonely contemplation—is not accomplished through a rationality divorced from feeling. Throughout the chapter, Bloom fields a multitude of mimetic responses from which he produces a fleshly—humanly particular, rather

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than abstract—thought. Very quiet throughout the chapter—and, it must be said, in the entire book—at the end of "Sirens," Bloom cannot hold his peace. He is heard, if not by the drinkers in the Ormond Bar, by the reader, the sound of whose breath accompanies his or her own reading and thinking.

Notes

1. A number of writers have focused on the technical aspects of music in "Sirens." Perhaps the most impressive is Zack Bowen's deployment of his musical expertise in the service of a richly humanist reading of the chapter. He suggests, for example, that Simon Dedalus transposes his song into a lower key because "he does not have the requisite confidence that he will be able to hit the high B flat called for at the end" (140). Other highly music-literate articles include those by Nadya Zimmerman and Jürgen Grandt.

2. In a fine piece of historicist scholarship on "Sirens," Katherine Mullin notes that the "pyrotechnics of Joyce's style hav[e] . . . deflected critical focus from the intriguingly banal substance of the chapter" (475). However, she does not explicitly consider whether such deflection is central to the chapter, and ultimately she echoes Emer Nolan's view that Joyce is a supremely unprejudiced mirror of the ideological climate of his time.

3. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* Adorno and Horkheimer argue that reason gradually separates itself from "sensuous experience in order to dominate it" (36). This separation is later formalized in the division between philosophy and art. Philosophy claims for itself a rationality free from sensuality and insists that art declines "to pass as cognition" (32), that art allows itself to become "a mere object of contemplation" (34), pure mimesis, purely decorative beauty.

4. André Topia reaches similar conclusions. He argues that the "auditory function" of language—prosody, in effect—undermines the sovereignty of reason "and penetrates the bodies [of the characters in "Sirens"] through all their openings" (79). Again, the infiltration of the processes of capitalist exchange into the body's most intimate workings is regarded as somehow revolutionary.

5. See Terry Eagleton's discussion of the Catholic Church's relationship with British imperialism (27–103).

6. Vincent J. Cheng, for one, is unconvinced by what he sees as the view among poststructuralist radicals (he cites Colin MacCabe, Terry Eagleton, and Fredric Jameson) "that stylistic and linguistic resistance to narrativity and narrative conventions . . . is itself a political act" (226).

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7. See for example Topia 77–78.

8. According to Jack W. Weaver, Joyce showed an interest in the musical avant-garde while living in Zurich. It is likely that Joyce read Ferruccio Busoni's *New Aesthetic* (1907), and he certainly attended the premier of Antheil's "Ballet Mechanique" (4). Weaver further suggests that Joyce had a high regard for Schoenberg's "experimental atonal music" (92) by 1922, the year of *Ulysses*'s publication. This claim is supported by Otto Luening, who recalls Joyce's comment that "For me there are only two composers. One is Palestrina and the other is Schoenberg" (193–94).

9. See Kant's statement that "Beauty is an object's form of *purposiveness* insofar as it is perceived in the object *without the presentation of a purpose*" (§17; 84).

10. See Mullin's analysis of the sexual politics of the barmaids' role in the chapter.

11. See J. H. Prynne's reflections on the philosophical significance of the lyrical *O*.

12. Jacques Lacan famously theorizes that "Man's desire is the desire of the Other" (38).

13. Mullin very persuasively argues that barmaids had little real power in the workplace in this period (478).

14. For Adorno, however, thought is always a thought *of* something, and as a consequence must always contain a moment of representation, of mimesis. In *Against Epistemology* he contends that even "the meaning of logic itself demands facticity" (78).

15. The emphasis throughout the novel on Bloom's outsider status has been well documented and needs no rehearsal here. However, it is worth noting that at the beginning of "Sirens," the narrator, mimicking the barmaids' talk about another man, makes what could be construed as a derogatory play on Bloom's "foreign" appearance: "O greasy eyes! Imagine being married to a man like that . . . Married to Bloom, to greaseaseabloom" (334–35).

16. John Barrell gives a fascinating account of the strategies that eighteenth-century gentlemen developed to liberate themselves from the whims of sexual desire (63–87).

17. See Adorno's argument that "Art is the social antithesis to society" (*Aesthetic Theory* 8).

18. As de Man puts it, "to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic" (214).

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19. See Derrida's description of the Joyce of *Ulysses* as "the most Hegelian of modern novelists" (153).

20. See Merleau-Ponty's "Cézanne's Doubt" for a treatment of the painter's comparable, though specifically visual, activity (282).

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"Massed Ambiguity": Fatness in Henry James's *The Ivory Tower*

Daniel Hannah

> [T]hat they are each the particular individual of the particular weight being of course of the essence of my *donnée*. They are interesting that way—I have no use for them here in any other.
>
> —Henry James, notes for *The Ivory Tower* (221)[1]

Henry James's final and incomplete attempt to write a new novel, *The Ivory Tower,* opens with "the deliberate step" of Rosanna Gaw, "a truly massive young person" (5) and closes with the novel's hero, Graham "Gray" Fielder, pondering the "massed ambiguity" of his fate and being greeted by the "florid, solid, smiling person" (198) of the heavyset Davey Bradham. From its start to its abrupt stop, this fragment of a novel foregrounds bodily presence and, indeed, corpulent mass in a manner perhaps unexpected from James's infamously abstract late prose. Bodies, bodily features, and conversations about bodies of "particular weight," especially "creatures so materially weighted" (23) as Rosanna and Davey Bradham, figure prominently, at times obsessively.[2] How does considering this help us understand James's abandoned novel, the penultimate staging of his long-cherished international theme, which follows Gray's return from Europe to the charmingly corrupt and corrupting world of his grotesquely enormous American inheritance? The fat body, I wish to suggest, offers in James's fragment and schema for the novel an unstable trope for social processes of marginalization, for economic and stylistic excess, and for his own sense of authorship. *The Ivory Tower* looks to obesity as a physical, psychological, and culturally inscribed state of both imprisonment, encirclement, containment, and of excess, spillage, and abandon.[3] At

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the same time, corpulent mass as a figure in James's text helps it explore moral and aesthetic potentialities. These torn visions of obesity reflect the novel's ambivalent response to fat's overwhelmingly negative social status—James's writing both reinscribes and resists readings of fatness as disease, as a site of shame, as waste.

James's pivotal treatment of corpulence may have been, as Susan Griffin and Tim Armstrong have argued, autobiographically informed by the author's ambivalent relation to his own fat body, by his ongoing anxieties about the femininity of fatness, and by his experiments with dieting (most notably his adoption of Fletcherist mastication in the early 1900s). In her insightful reading of *Washington Square*—the only other text by James to feature a fat woman as its central character—Griffin links Catherine Sloper's bulk to James's negotiation of his own weight issues and his parents' desire for both his independence and dependence. For Griffin, Catherine's weight suggests both an "expression of her desire to please her father, and the manifestation of a female power" of sexual independence "that her father wishes not to see" (133–34). Accordingly, "Catherine's story is that of the woman whom James simultaneously fears to marry and dreads that, unmarried and self-nurturing, he may become after all" (136).[4] But if Catherine Sloper's fatness signals a newly self-sufficient, even proactive yet highly anxious vision of female sexuality in James's work, *The Ivory Tower,* through its paired treatment of Rosanna Gaw and Davey Bradham as fat subjects, makes corpulence part of a wider critical concern with representation, reading, and management of the physical self, of style, and of the social circulation of fat discourse. Through a paired treatment of masculine and feminine obesity, James's novel both invokes and critiques gendered management of the fat body.

Weight is a slippery, unstable subject in James's late style, and in many ways, the bodies that swarm in *The Ivory Tower* mark the constructive tensions that, as Thomas J. Otten has recently suggested, attend any act of material representation, any representative claim in the world of his final novels.[5] In the only other substantial response to fatness in *The Ivory Tower,* Tim Armstrong argues for an economic reading of obesity as he charts discursive ties between James's Fletcherism and his revisionist aesthetics during and after the composing of the New York Edition:

> the text of the novel as we have it proposes a crude embodiment of financial status in its characters. Rosanna is fat, tasteless, has a vast inheritance, and is "morally elephantine" in the

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> positive sense that she has a huge reserve of moral force. On the first page of the novel we are told that she rejects "the most expensive modern aids to the constitution of a 'figure'" which she might have used. In other words, she does not diet, Fletcherize or take Thyroid extracts. Gray [. . .] is small in stature, "light and nervous," and wants to be a "non-producer," to resist the inheritance or accumulation which has fallen his way. He represents a true cosmopolitan taste, and we are told that he may turn out to be a writer. His friend Horton is tall, fleshier, authoritative (their difference in stature is emphasized), and wants capital—to fill out his height, as it were, to give his figure the bulk it deserves and which, for mysterious reasons, he has not achieved. He also generates financial waste, squandering Gray's fortune. (112)

Armstrong points to important links between the corporeal, the economic, and the aesthetic in James's writing. The bodily forms at play in *The Ivory Tower* are, however, more complex and various than this reading suggests. Armstrong cites but does not explain James's conjoined "elephantine" treatment of Rosanna's tastelessness and "moral force"—enormity, here, pointing to both weakness and strength for a novelist who, as Sigi Jöttkandt's recent work reminds us, frequently envisaged the aesthetic and the ethical as two sides of the same coin. Armstrong also fails to mention the fabulously wealthy Davey or Gussy Bradham, fat and thin respectively, and washes over the schematic ambiguity surrounding both Gray's body and size and Horton's fleshiness. Far from offering "crude embodiment[s] of financial status," the characters of *The Ivory Tower* figure forth James's uneasy resistance to and perpetuation of the regulatory norms of bodily size. While James claims, in his notes for the novel, that "the particular weight" of each "particular individual" is "the essence of [his] *donnée,*" the bodily dimensions of those individuals are often blurred and contested, foregrounding the novel's insistent play with the pleasures and pains, the capacity and containment of physical mass.

Accordingly, this essay probes how James's writing of the fat body both adopts and resists early-twentieth-century fat-phobic circulations of the non-normative body shape as a site of waste and sickness. I also seek to trace the relationship between corporeal self-management and capitalist acquisition and exploitation in the novel. I close by linking *The Ivory Tower*'s guiding tropes of encirclement and enclosure—key to the movements of Rosanna and Davey at the start and finish of this novel fragment—with its marginal attention to the massive female subject.

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Waste management:

Corpulence, health, and excess

> As a form of representational labor, the fat woman's work of emblematizing the circulatory embolisms of a culture might be said to fall into the economic category, not of either production or reproduction, but rather of waste management.
>
> —Michael Moon (231)

Abandoned in 1914, James's *The Ivory Tower* consists of three complete books set in affluent Newport and one complete chapter of the fourth of an envisaged ten books. Rosanna Gaw, the only daughter of the wealthy, elderly, and embittered Abel Gaw, dominates the perspective of the opening book as she awaits the return of Graham "Gray" Fielder from Europe to visit the bedside of his dying uncle Fred Betterman, who is also her father's ex-partner in business. Having been romantically attached to Gray during an earlier period in Europe, Rosanna has, prior to the book's opening, engineered a reconciliation of sorts between her father and Gray's father and helped orchestrate Betterman's request for his estranged nephew's presence. By the close of the fragment, Abel Gaw and Fred Betterman have died, leaving substantial inheritances to Rosanna and especially Gray, who acquires $10 million. The fragment also introduces us to two important couples whose presence will be crucial to the story of how Gray manages his newfound wealth. Davey and Gussy Bradham represent the upper echelon of Newport's moneyed class—their estate is a center for social activity, and Gray's arrival becomes a locus for conversations at Gussy's lavish dinner parties. Cissy Foy and Horton "Haughty" Vint, lovers and aspiring members of the Bradham's social circle, enter the novel as Gray looks to his old friend Haughty to manage his estate. Foy and Vint play roles similar to the deceptive couplings of Kate Croy and Merton Densher in *The Wings of the Dove* and Charlotte Stant and Prince Amerigo in *The Golden Bowl*. James's extensive notes for the completion of the novel suggest that Vint would go on to embezzle from his friend and Gray would magnanimously forgive him.

The Ivory Tower emerges from a transitional moment in the historical circulation of the fat body in Western culture. Hillel Schwartz describes the period from 1880 to 1920 as an era of increasingly regulated body size and shape, moving from a mid-nineteenth-century equation of bodily

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mass with capitalistic absorption and success to a "new kinaesthetic ideal of a dynamically balanced body" (113), reflective of moves toward an incrementally systematized industrial-economic sphere. Gluttony and fatness came to signify "problems of flow" and "a threat to the system, a moral as well as a physical danger." Key to this shift toward a conception of fatness as a problem of flow is a new conception of the fat body as a psychologically readable site of spillage or waste. Michael Moon, in his dialogic celebration of director John Waters with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, emphasizes the manner in which fat subjects in the twentieth century circulate in public discourse as essentially opaque, readable, or "emblematizing" bodies. What he calls the "representational labor" of the fat body recalls the discursive circulation of the female body in Western culture as it "takes on the burden," as Elizabeth Grosz argues, of "the other's [the male's] corporeality," while "men are left free to soar to the heights of theoretical reflection and cultural production" (22). Like the female body, the fat body, as a supposedly instantly recognizable, classifiable site for appraisal, takes on the burden of representing the normative body shape's capacity for indiscretion and excess, defining the disembodied ideal by opposition. The female fat body, outside the bounds of the normative on two counts, comes to represent a peculiarly visceral instance of society's rhetorical management of waste.

In its close attention to the fat body of Rosanna Gaw, *The Ivory Tower* evinces an ambivalent response to the fat subject, a response one might characterize as both fat phobic and fat affirmative. As a transitional text, it speaks both to images of fatness as a sign of health and to readings of obesity as a site of wasteful excess in need of regulation. From our first vision of her in the opening chapter, James's novel both establishes and disowns figurative links between Rosanna's corporeal bulk and invalidity:

> Her [. . .] draperies, white and voluminous, yielded to the mild breeze in the manner of those of a ship held back from speed yet with its canvas expanded; they conformed to their usual law of suggestion that the large loose ponderous girl, mistress as she might have been of the most expensive modern aids to the constitution of a "figure," lived, as they said about her, in wrappers and tea-gowns; so that, save for her enjoying obviously the rudest health, she might have been a convalescent creeping forth from the consciousness of stale bedclothes. (5)

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Rosanna's fatness here falls between representational models—she suggests the figure of a ship both "held back" and set to travel full-tilt "with its canvas expanded"; she displays "the rudest health" (a phrase suggesting almost excessive vibrancy) and resembles a "convalescent creeping forth." Immediately, then, James's novel foregrounds Rosanna's body as a site of struggle—both the physical struggle of a ship against the wind and a patient against the pull of her bed, and the rhetorical struggle between competing readings of her representational weight. While, as Armstrong notes, Rosanna's refusal of "the most expensive modern aids to the constitution of a 'figure'" signals her rejection of contemporaneous dietary regimens and gadgets, the novel remains caught between a desire to expose her body as a site of waste and a gaze that seeks to recode that body as healthy and even heroic. James's language in this opening passage points to a possible aesthetic distaste for the form of Rosanna's body. Calling up, by contrast, a Jamesian aesthetic of circumscribed form and unity (the artist who famously draws his "circle" around relations that "stop nowhere" [*Literary Criticism* 2: 1041]), Rosanna's "large loose ponderous" dimensions evoke his unfavorable dismissal of lengthy Victorian novels as "large loose baggy monsters" (1107). But if, as Judith Butler has most recently argued, James's work explores an ethics of capacity, "affirm[ing] the necessity of the incongruous," Rosanna Gaw's "voluminous" body, absorbing and engulfing her surroundings, might also offer a figurative site for working through the author's "ethically capacious sensibility" (119).

A similarly doubled vision can be traced in James's notebook entries for the novel where, again playfully calling up the weightiness of his novel's first reflector, he looks forward to Gray's identification with Rosanna as a moral center:

> He recognizes quickly that, putting Davey Bradham perhaps somewhat aside, she is the being, up and down the place, with whom he is going to be able most to *communicate*. With Rosanna he isn't going to communicate "intellectually," aesthetically, and all the rest, the least little bit: Rosanna has no more taste than an elephant; Rosanna is only *morally* elephantine, or whatever it is that is morally most massive and magnificent.
>
> (223; James's emphasis)

As in the novel's opening description, James's tone seems to both mock and celebrate the corpulence of his character: Rosanna's weight, here, is

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emblematic of both her poverty of taste, her waste of aesthetic space, and her moral massiveness, her "magnificent" ethical presence. Indeed, even James's choice of Rosanna's family name hints at his doubled attitude. According to the *OED,* in an obsolete form, the word *gaw* means to gape, stare, or look intently—a significant sense for an author who, in his autobiography, celebrates "watch[ing] the small boy" that is his younger self "dawdle and gape" (16–17). But at the same time, the name also calls up the related word *gawp,* which means to gape, yawn, or devour (as in the phrase *to gawp up*), and as a noun refers to a fool or simpleton. Etymologically, then, Rosanna Gaw evokes a doubled position in James's text as a simple, "elephantine" devourer of capital, food, and her surroundings *and* as a sensitive observer, a "dawdl[ing] and gap[ing]" center of consciousness (not unlike earlier naive Jamesian reflectors such as Maisie Farange or Hyacinth Robinson).

The Ivory Tower's shifting representation of the fat woman as a site of waste and as a site of capacious potential reveals itself through scenes in which Rosanna's body is set alongside the bodies of others in the text. James's narration of Rosanna's body works through a series of corporeal juxtapositions—the youthful vigour of Rosanna's weight versus the withered body of her father, Abel; Rosanna's oppressed sense of bulk versus Davey Bradham's enjoyment of his size; Rosanna's projected, circulated body versus the directorial, slim, and elusive form of Gussy Bradham. In each case, the contrasts between these bodies register the text's alertness to corporeal regulation, at times casting a critical gaze over the social mechanisms behind body images, and at other times adopting as narrative devices the spectacular, objectifying lenses offered by such mechanisms.

James's opening account of Rosanna's "voluminous" body goes on to offer a sharp juxtaposition of her "massive" presence with the withered and contracted figure of her slowly dying father. In the first act of the novel, Rosanna approaches the Betterman estate in hope of hearing that Gray has arrived. When the "clear blank windows" offer no such communication, she "passe[s] round the house instead of applying at the rather grandly gaping portal—which might in all conscience have accommodated her" (6). If this final phrase dismisses, somewhat ironically, the lurking suggestion that Rosanna may be too large for the door, the narrator also represents her decision to hover around the house rather than pass into it as a consequence of her own sense of misfitting in inadequate space: she moves as a "person essentially unobservant of forms, which her amplitude somehow

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never found of the right measure, so that she felt the misfit in many cases ridiculous." Rosanna's figuratively weighty displacement from the house of Mr. Betterman is soon coupled with her father's withered sense of entrapment. Abel Gaw, who has already made his own way to the Betterman estate, sits at its "outer edge" in a "low basket-chair which covered him in save for little more than his small sharp shrunken profile, detached against the bright further distance, and his small protrusive foot, crossed over a knee and agitated by incessant nervous motion" (6–7). Abel's appearance, we are informed, offers, for Rosanna, the "meaning" of his life, "small" as "the contracted size of his little huddled figure in the basket-chair" and hemmed in: "He was a person without an alternative, and if any had ever been open to him, at an odd hour or two, somewhere in his inner dimness, he had long since closed the gate against it and now revolved in the hard-rimmed circle from which he had not a single issue" (7).

Seemingly detached and hopelessly entrenched, monstrously large and witheringly small, circling and encircled, Rosanna and Abel Gaw are immediately placed at opposite poles. Rosanna's fatness, in this opening chapter, seems to signify both her ability to exceed the "contracted" circle of her father's devotion to finances and her marginalized status in this wealthy world of "forms." Yet even if she enters the text "essentially unobservant of forms," her sense of misfitting as she orbits the Betterman estate also points to how she remains defined by the gravitational pull of paternal wealth. When Gray later comes upon Abel Gaw on Mr. Betterman's verandah, in book 2, he finds the "ripest revelation" of what he had always suspected of Rosanna—that she "had been involved in something, produced by something, intimately pressing upon her and yet as different as possible from herself" (67). Placed alongside her father's withered yet impressive frame in the novel's first chapter, Rosanna's corporeal mass represents moral health and, at the same time, disability—evoking the phonetic ring of her father's name, Rosanna's mass renders her unable or disabled in the face of the quite literal frames governing life in this leisured outpost.[6] Moreover, if Abel's name could be read here as invoking its biblical counterpart, Rosanna's attendance to her father's almost corpselike state might point to her playing a regendered Cain, profiting at the death of her father yet *marked* by her mass as an outsider (the biblical Abel sacrifices "the firstlings of his flock and [. . .] the fat thereof" [Gen. 4.4], pointing to Rosanna's potential status as the sacrificial waste of the Gaw estate).

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In the second chapter Rosanna's bodily mass is paired with that of a male companion of equal girth. The connection between capital and corpulence floats near the surface of the text at the opening of Davey Bradham's and Rosanna's first and only shared scene. As the narrator underscores their shared mass—"Davey was, like herself, richly and healthily replete, though with less of his substance in stature" (19)—the background to their "charming cliff walk" offers an image of capitalistic obesity in the form of overgrown houses:

> a vast carpet of undivided lawns, kept in wondrous condition, with a meandering right-of-way for a seaward fringe and bristling wide-winged villas that spoke of a seated colony; many of these huge presences reducing to marginal meanness their strip of the carpet. (18)

Indeed, this chapter is ringed by such descriptions, closing as Rosanna eyes how "the nondescript excrescences of Gussy's 'cottage,' vast and florid, and in a kindred company of hunches and gables and pinnacles confessed, even if in confused accents, to its monstrous identity" (33).[7] But if Davey and Rosanna might also be read as "reducing to marginal meanness" their surroundings, their experiences of weight in the world are immediately set in gendered contrast.

Whereas Davey, the "frankly fat gentleman," "enjoyed, visibly, all he carnally possessed," Rosanna, the "poor young woman, would have been content with, would have been glad of, a scantier allowance" (19). Indeed, for the narrator, at once sympathetic and archly fat phobic, Rosanna's and Davey's bulk reinforces their essential differences:

> The difference between our pair, thus confronted, might have been felt as the greater by the very fact of their outward likeness as creatures so materially weighted; it would have been written all over Rosanna for the considering eye that every grain of her load, from innermost soul to outermost sense, was that of reality and sincerity; whereas it might by the same token have been felt of Davey that in the temperature of life as he knew it his personal identity had been, save for perhaps some small tough lurking residuum, long since puffed away in pleasant spirals of vapour. (23)

While the narrator works satirically here, to underscore Davey Bradham's

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moral vacuity in contrast with Rosanna's "reality and sincerity," it also relies on a model of the fat body, "every grain of [his or] her load," as simply legible, as "written all over" for the "considering eye" of a non-corpulent reader. On one hand, such a narrative move seeks to refute the easy correlation between capitalistic excess and Rosanna's bodily mass: if Davey's "pleasant[ly]" complacent corpulence and the Bradhams' house front offer "confess[ions]" of monstrosity "in confused accents," Rosanna's body speaks with "reality and sincerity" of a desire for less, for "a scantier allowance." At the same time, while offering a sympathetic window onto Rosanna's struggle with the public status of her gendered weight, the narrator's rendition of this struggle as outwardly readable (because of her size) bespeaks the novel's dependence (to borrow from Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) on a "cultural economy of knowingness" (249) with regard to the fat female body. Whereas Davey's nonchalance removes him from any spectacle of shame, the reader here is co-opted as a thin subject who knows better than Rosanna Gaw the meaning of her fatness.

If the juxtaposition of Rosanna's body with her father and Davey Bradham speaks to a sense of gendered imbalance in the handling of obesity, her placement alongside the thinner female figure of Gussy Bradham foregrounds the manner in which understandings of normative body shape rely on projections of the othered fat body. In the third chapter James places Rosanna, the "plain dull shy spinster" (37), in the reception room of Gussy Bradham. Gussy, we are informed, offers an expansive account of Rosanna for the attendees at her lavish teas, an account that figuratively appears to project Rosanna's "momentous" (45) physical mass even before she arrives: "Gussy's ideas about her, as about everything in the world, could on occasion do more to fill the air of any scene over which Gussy presided than no matter what vociferation of any massed crowd surrounding that lady" (34). If the keynote behind Rosanna's arrival here is one of spreading, "fill[ing] the air," Gussy's body is marked out as a site of containment and constriction. Rosanna's view of her hostess emphasizes her almost nonhuman thinness:

> one couldn't so much as envy her the prodigy of her "figure," which had been at eighteen, as one had heard, that of a woman of forty and was now at forty, one saw, that of a girl of eighteen: such a state of the person wasn't human, to the younger woman's sombre sense, but might have been that of some shining hum-

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> ming insect, a thing of the long-constricted waist, the minimised yet caparisoned head, the fixed disproportionate eye and tough transparent wing, gossamer guaranteed. (38–39)

At the same time, while Gussy's rigidly thin presence—"long-constricted," "minimized," "fixed," and "tough"—suggests a body image in direct opposition to Rosanna's "voluminous" and "expanded" (5) figure, James deftly links the two through Rosanna's awareness of her hostess's pervasive social management. Standing at a distance, Rosanna imagines Gussy's body making a vocal appeal:

> Take her as an advertisement of all the latest knowledges of how to "treat" every inch of the human surface and where to "get" every scrap of the personal envelope, so far as she is enveloped, and she does achieve an effect sublime in itself and thereby absolute in a wavering world. (39)

Gussy's "sublim[ity]" is, for Rosanna, an "effect" of her artful management of the surface, her "treat[ment]" of the "personal envelope"—envelopment calling up both Gussy's attention to cosmetics and her manipulation of the social scene, her surrounding associates. As an "advertisement," Gussy projects an "absolute" vision of her containment even as she "fill[s] the air" with talk of Rosanna—she both rhetorically envelops and is, to a certain extent, strategically enveloped by her "momentous guest" (45). Her "shining humming" representation of "gossamer"-like and "constricted" slimness works, then, through her management of Rosanna's presence as something projected beyond containment. Prefiguring this interdependence of the thin and the fat bodies of women in the novel, James's notes for *The Ivory Tower*'s completion paint a picture of Gussy's expansive sense of presence, her "aggressive mass" (238), bringing the text "even to the very cracking or bursting of the mould" (237).

Each of these scenes, with Abel Gaw, Davey Bradham, and Gussy Bradham, demonstrates how James's novel insistently returns to the fat body of Rosanna as a site of cultural conflict, foregrounding—sometimes complicitly, sometimes critically—the social circulation and projection of the fat body as a site of waste, excess, uncontainability. But James's novel also traces paths of resistance for the fat subject in the face of such discursive management. If *The Ivory Tower*'s account of the meeting of the novel's two fat subjects, Rosanna and Davey, hovers around a psychologi-

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cal equation of Rosanna's weight with the demands and stress produced by an insatiably consumerist social climate, Rosanna's dialogue in this scene seeks to resist such a narrative of inevitability, offering an alternative rhetorical economy.

While Davey may represent, for Rosanna, the fat-inducing threat posed by capitalist desire, he also, as a fat embodiment of that desire, offers an empathic ear for her concerns about Gray: Davey is, she tells him, "the only one of [his] lot" (22) whom she trusts. Even though he offers himself as "the biggest babbler alive" (22), Rosanna overturns his linking of size and risk. Firstly, in a voice that blurs the borders between James's arch narrator and the determining perspective of Rosanna's consciousness, we are told Davey's large frame conceals only a "small tough lurking residuum" of "personal identity," of moral value. Then, in a move that reinscribes weight and growth as figurative markers of imaginative potential (in a movement toward more conventional tropes of flame and light), Rosanna fills out Davey's vacant shell, calling on a rhetorical economy that disowns the value of quantity and mass even as it invokes it:

> Our young woman was at this moment, however, less interested in quantities than in qualities of candour; she could get what passed for it by the bushel, by the ton, whenever, right or left, she chose to chink her pocket. Her requirement for actual use was such a glimmer from the candle of truth as a mere poor woman might have managed to kindle. What was left of precious in Davey might thus have figured but as a candle-end; yet for the lack of it she should perhaps move in darkness. And her brief intensity of watch was in a moment rewarded; her companion's candle-end was his not quite burnt-out value as a gentleman. This was enough for her, and she seemed to see her way. (23)

Here Rosanna converts the "brief," the remnant, the small into something adequate, "enough." While "quantities" of candour are available in Newport "by the bushel, by the ton" wherever wealth "chink[s]" its "pocket," Rosanna looks to an alternative form of expansiveness or growth—the careful kindling of a "candle-end"—for her moral light. Rosanna's conversion of Davey, her revaluation of his apparently empty, corpulent shell, points to how James's novel proves capable of evoking competing versions of bodily mass (as waste, as ethical capacity) even in the same scene. I now turn to consider how Rosanna's relationship with Graham Fielder,

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her exposure of him to the corruption of Newport and her efforts to protect him, play out a covert concern with this uneasy management of her corpulence.

"The artful, the total rotundity": Roundness, containment, and capacity

> "You wronged the man who has come?"
> "Oh dreadfully!" Rosanna said with great sweetness. [. . .]
> "You wouldn't have him round—?"
> "Oh that would have been nothing!" she laughed; and this time she sailed on again.
>
> —*The Ivory Tower* (16)

When Rosanna cuts off her father's questioning of the harm she has previously done Gray in their European past—"You wouldn't have him round—?"—with the glib reply, "Oh that would have been nothing!" James subtly constructs Rosanna's and Gray's relations as being intimately tied to a narrative of body shape. Beyond the direct meaning of Abel Gaw's question ("You wouldn't have him come over?"), his phrase calls up an alternative reading: Rosanna's "wrong[ing]" of Gray may, though she denies it, be linked to her desire for his slimness, her desire to "have him" not "round." To be "round" here would be, according to Rosanna, "nothing," an answer that might hint at the male "round" subject's greater sense of social freedom but might also point to equations, in James's work, between fatness and absence. If Rosanna's reply suggests that her romantic refusal of Gray (not having him come over) would have been worthless and that her possible role in denying Gray his share of Betterman's inheritance was of more import, that reply also connects her evaluations of herself in terms of romance and wealth with her "round" body. What this evocation of the novel's "round" theme points to, then, is how the story of Gray's arrival and socialization at Newport plays out through a covert narrative of managing the fat woman's body. For Tessa Hadley, James's late novels vitally stage a tension between an "almost elegiac rendering of a now vanished cultural aesthetic—the beauty of custom, of ritual, of appearances" and a "revolutionary interrogation of the function of women's consciousness and women's representation within that aesthetic" (22). In

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The Ivory Tower we might also trace a similarly ambivalent rendering of the wealthy elite, both an elegiac attraction to its forms of leisure and a critique of its gendered social managements, embodied in the novel's shifting deployment of womanly roundness as a trope for both vulgarity and resistance.

Rosanna's growing sense of the threat that Newport's wealth and social environment might pose to her newly arrived protégé, Gray, emerges as a reference to the expansion of corpulent mass, to the awkwardly managed fattening of the body. Three conversations, with Davey, Gussy, and finally Cissy Foy in book 1 (the only complete book rendered through the consciousness of Rosanna) establish this link. In the second chapter, as Davey initiates a conversation with her about Gray, Rosanna experiences a sudden sense of slipping:

> Rosanna pulled up in the path; she somehow at once felt her possession of this interest clouded—shared as yet as it had been only with her father, whose share she could control. It then and there came to her in one of the waves of disproportionate despair in which she felt half the impressions of life break, that she wasn't going to be able to control at all the great participations. (19–20)

Recalling the convalescent image that opened the novel's account of Rosanna's body, this loss of "control" leaves her in "the phase of feeling [. . .] weak and a little sick" (21). And as Davey talks on, informing her of the Bradhams' and their associates' insatiable desire for "precious knowledge" of Gray—"I give you warning that there's no limit to what we want to know"—Rosanna processes this sudden "wave" of unforeseen demands, digesting them under a sense of "constant oppression": "Rosanna took this in now as she so often took things—working it down in silence at first: it shared in the general weight of all direct contributions to her consciousness" (22). Davey's vision of Gray as prey immediately figures, then, for Rosanna, as an experience of "weight," of oppressive feeding (an item to be "work[ed]" down), and of "weak" invalidity.

This linking of Gray's entrance to troubled, uncontrolled acts of consuming continues in the third chapter, as Rosanna becomes the "momentous guest" (45) of Davey's wife, Gussy. In the presence of this directorial hostess and her associates with their "enormous assumptions" (37), Rosanna feels Gussy's "extraordinary perfections of neatness, of

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elegance, of arrangement" are passed to her "as on some polished salver" (39), serving up an uncomfortable sense of artful management even as Gussy's eye betrays, Rosanna suspects, a note of "fear." When Gussy reveals Cissy's prior acquaintance with Gray and mentions the young girl's "great ideas about him," Rosanna is left "held in spite of herself by some *heavy* spell" (40, my emphasis). As she experiences misgivings about handing "the subject of her interest," Gray, "over unreservedly to all waiting, all so remarkably gathering contacts and chances," she "swallow[s] down every fear of any cost of anything to herself"—as she later phrases it to herself, she "behave[s]" (41). This swallowing keeps up when Gussy goes on to relate how Cissy was "fed" with "information" about Gray's background by her fiancé and Rosanna's one-time suitor "Haughty" Vint, information based on "close contacts, the most interesting, between the pair, as well as the least suspected ever by Rosanna." Gussy's account of this feeding builds "to such an effect that the transmitted trickle of it had after a moment swelled from Gussy's lips into a stream by which our friend's consciousness was flooded" (42). This vicarious feeding of Gray to Rosanna reaches its logical climax when Gussy makes her "final leap to action" in the form of the announcement, "I want him to dinner of course right off!" (45).

Gussy only gives Rosanna up in this scene when Cissy steps forward, "quench[ing]" her hostess, and, as Gussy imagines, "dealing somehow with their massive friend" (48). Again, Cissy's intervention, containing Rosanna, "grasping [her] for possession," "wrapping [her] about" (47), foregrounds how her growing sense of a threat to Gray is coded in terms linked to the management of her own "immense" bodily presence. Cissy follows up Gussy's insinuations, laying bare the nature of her own previous connection to Gray, three years previous: "Immense, as she went, Rosanna felt, the number of things she gave her thus together to think about" (50). James's syntax here links immensity both to her growing consciousness of a vague threat to Gray and to her experience of her own body ("Rosanna felt" immense, or large). And once again this overwhelming awareness of both social rapacity and personal corpulence leads to Rosanna experiencing "a sudden sense of weakness" in which "she drop[s] upon" a verandah settee "as for large retrieval of menaced ease, with a need she herself alone could measure" (51).

Through these three scenes, which bring book 1 to a close, James's novel repeatedly links the threat posed by the Newport elite to an over-

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whelming loss of control, to insistent serving and feeding, and to a sense of immensity, heaviness, and weakness. One might read Rosanna's efforts to protect Gray from such consumerist and consuming advances, then, as a struggle to manage the weight of her friend, to keep at bay the fattening temptations of capitalist excess. The fat female body becomes, here, the battleground for protecting and containing masculine capitalistic tendencies for rapacious expansion. But if such scenes suggest, as Armstrong argues, an easy equation between bulk and capital, James's attention to the besieged and burgeoning body of Gray suggests a more complicated treatment of the interpenetrating social fields of corporeal surveillance, gender, and capitalist and rhetorical economies of excess and display. Fat, as Lauren Berlant has suggested, both "excites" or "elicits fresh interpretation" and "conversational play" as an "unquantified substance" *and* "accrues to itself an unshakable stability of identity," an "aura" of "fixity" as "a thing of excess" (91). Offering such diverse embodiments of excess, absence, and stability, experiences of "distortions of scale that falsify or transfigure notions of natural form" (96), such as fat bodies, offer "common routes to imagining" both "fate and pain" (as experienced by the fat subject as fixed, embodied stereotype) and "change and freedom" (as signified by the charged form of the pregnant body as a site of national futurity). With this in mind, I wish to foreground how Gray's movement between repulsion from and attraction to American expansiveness—echoed in James's responses, in his notebooks, to the growth of his ideas for the novel—points to a shifting deployment of the fat female body as a figure for both waste and fertility, for both luxurious excess and pregnant possibility.

Gray's entry into Newport society immediately establishes America as a realm of the large: he comes prepared for "a 'big' experience" (61) and finds that "the range and scale" of difference in this country "disown[s] connections" (59) he has previously made. Central to this experience of largeness is his interview with his dying uncle, "the biggest and most native American impression that [he] can possibly be exposed to" (78). On the surface, James plays out here a simple drama of Gray as small, engulfed by opulent abundance: standing in the room of his dying uncle, offering himself for Mr. Betterman's appreciative gaze, Gray says "I've never been so sorry that there isn't more of me" (79). Betterman's return to appreciating his nephew seems, indeed, founded on a sense of Gray's insubstantial nature—he represents "a perfect clean blank," a "creature" outside the

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contaminating reach of his "touch" (85). But behind this narrative of capitalistic mass versus cultured abstraction and ethereality, Gray's encounter with his uncle also figures enlargement as creative growth. Initially, Gray refuses to be "smothered" by Betterman's and the Newport crowd's "large and vague" assumptions about his character and his future, "amid their fathomless resources and their luxuries or perversities of waste" (88); in opposition, he plays down any exaggeration in the interest of Betterman's or any other "sublime view of [him], view of [his] capacity." But this trope of capaciousness shifts in the succeeding scene between Gray and Rosanna, when, with a growing awareness of the personal politics of the Newport crowd, in the face of "tremendously much [. . .] to take in," "Gray's capacity grew" (104). While the world of finance may teach Gray to "lisp in dollars" the "figures, monstrous, fantastic, almost cabalistic," it also sets in process his realization of "those vast vague quantities, those spreading tracts, of his own consciousness" (179). Gray's entrance into the large "range and scale" of the leisured classes of America represents, then, a dual movement toward excessive waste and capacious expansion. In the interview of Gray with his uncle, James rhetorically ties this dual movement to Rosanna's body when Betterman justifies his selection of Gray with the phrase "we know, we know," alerting Gray to how Rosanna's large presence has stood behind this scene from the start: the reference to Rosanna has "for Gray an amount of reference that was like a great sum of items in a bill imperfectly scanned" (88).

"[C]lutching for immediate light" at "the surge of guiding petticoats, the charity of women more or less strange" (94), Gray's first experiences of Newport's expansiveness are marked out by ambivalent responses to potentially maternal bodies—bodies that both smother and suggest creative rebirth. Firstly, James explores the corporeal dimension of Gray's American experience through his maternalistic relations with the "ample, genial, familiar" (61) and aptly named Miss Mumby, Mr. Betterman's nurse. Miss Mumby, with her determination to "make" him "like our [American] food" (63), her shocking familiarities and "amusingly exotic" welcome, captures, for Gray, his ambivalent sense of America as a scene of "delightful violence" (58), "for it was evident there would be thousands" of Miss Mumbys, as "clearly colossal" (64). Dining on "waffles and maple syrup, followed, and on such scale, by melons and ice-cream," Gray submits to such violent delights "with his mouth full of a seasoned and sweetened, a soft, substantial coldness and richness that were at once the

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revelation of a world and the consecration of a fate." While Gray's body is consumed in advance through the social circulation of his image in the opening book, here his act of consuming, his "wallow[ing]" in rich fare, bespeaks his preparation for dining on the largess of his uncle's "massive and expansive" (76) dying body. When Mumby calls Gray to see Rosanna, "speaking apparently in [Rosanna's] name" (94) and suggesting they will also want dinner (96), the ties between the nurse's maternal feeding and Rosanna's mothering desire to protect Gray are made explicit.

In the ensuing scene, Gray is figured as "[b]elow" Rosanna "in stature," as "a small boy" in the presence of "the amplest of mothers" (99). Recalling the association between his exposure and Rosanna's sense of weight, Gray feels that "whatever he said or did would deprive her of resistance to an inward pressure which was growing as by the sight of him" (97). Seeking to rectify her exposure of Gray to the worst of her associates, Rosanna resembles a "mild and mighty mother" offering the womb-like "dark warmth of her spreading possession" (100). Realizing "it was for *him* to grow bigger" (99), Gray submits to Rosanna's vision of his "fate, or [their] situation" as the "gained momentum of a rush that began ever so far away and that has been growing and growing" (100). Yet submission here comes with resistance to the "smothering" sense of "possession" implied by Rosanna's rhetoric. Even as he appears to grow from within her presence, Gray asserts himself through an embrace of her ample self: "I have hold of you as tight as ever you've been held in your life" (101). Gray's determination "to grow bigger" uncertainly places him, then, as dependent infant and as fattening, embracing subject.

The tense joining of Gray's entrance into the wealthy world of Newport to the wasteful and fertile fat female body is crucial to the scene where Rosanna delivers her father's sealed deathbed letter to Gray, who places it, unopened, in the eponymous, "perfectly circular" (110) ivory tower. When, at the close of the second book, Gray withholds from Betterman's physician, Doctor Hatch, any reference to the letter he has placed in that "fine piece," the tower, he "pause[s] a moment before his acquisition, which seemed to have begun to guard, within the very minute, a secret of greater weight" (114). The tower, which, like the room where this scene plays out, is "somehow at once blank and replete" (106), figures the novel's complicated concern with the "greater weight" of Rosanna's and Gray's bodies. While Gray's refusal to read Abel Gaw's letter signals his desire to keep Newport's corrupting forces at bay, this secretive depositing

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of the letter in the artfully rotund tower likens Gray's efforts to carve out ethical space to a repressive but potentially inseminating displacement of the "blank" promises of wealth into an emblematically round yet perfectly contained objet d'art. Highlighting the sexually transgressive associations of Gray's placement of the letter as "a violation of the tower's 'perfectly circular' form, its 'total rotundity,'" John Carlos Rowe notes how the ensuing scene complicates a simply phallic, heterosexual reading of this exchange with "the tower and the letter both shar[ing] and confus[ing] masculine and feminine characteristics" (4). Indeed, in conjunction with these blurrings, the tower figures both the thin and the fat body: it is "very tall in proportion to the rest of its size" (110) and tightly contained, "fitting together" with "infinite neatness"; but like the obese body, it is, for all its "perfectly circular" form, a symbol of waste, "wasted ingenuity." Caught between containment and excess, fertility and waste, the tower encapsulates James's association of Rosanna's efforts to protect Gray—and Gray's uncertain entrance into Rosanna's world—with the "artful [. . .] rotundity" of an indeterminately gendered fatness.

For Rowe, this scene becomes a locus for James's divided aesthetic. On one hand, encircling any hint of "the corruption and fallibility of experience," it seeks "to maintain the ivory tower" of art "in the face of every threat to its surface" (7); on the other, it mocks "his own desire to complete the circle, to preserve 'the artful, the total rotundity' of significant form." Building on this suggestion, I would argue that James's notes for the novel link his development and management of art to his handling of Rosanna's difficulties with weight. On one hand, his earliest comments on the novel's composition from 1910—in its embryonic form the work was provisionally entitled "Mrs. Max"—offer a sense of the beautifully excessive growth of his ideas: "It only looms, it only shines and shimmers, *too* beautiful and too interesting; it only hangs there too rich and too full and with too much to give and to pay" (*Complete Notebooks* 261).[8] On the other, the novel will work, James's dictated plans from 1914 suggest, through a constrictive albeit fragile management of that excess. Recalling the constricted waist of Gussy Bradham, the notes point to a vision of "magnificent packed and calculated closeness" (*Ivory Tower* 252), of "tight packing" and "the most magnificent masterly little vivid economy" (206).[9] While, as Rowe suggests, Gray's and Rosanna's deployments of the ivory tower play out, the novel's guiding tension between formal enclosure and deconstructive fragmentation, they also point to links between the

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contained excesses, the "artful [. . .] rotundity" of this scene and the novel's wider concern with circling, with the round, with the obese. If Rosanna's and Gray's exchanges through the tower and the letter blur sexual and textual forms of mastery, they also figure the novel's shifting narration of the relationship between fat and thin, the round and the flat, through the motif of encirclement. I conclude this essay by briefly considering the troubled but potentially liberating ties between circling and fatness in James's fragment.

Fat at the margins: Obesity and encirclement

> The fat body rings the margins of the good self, haunting them as it helps create them. The fat body must be repeatedly evoked at the margins, drawn in and then expelled, in order to continue taking the weight of corporeality off thin bodies—playing much the same role as that taken by the female body in relation to the male.
>
> —Le'a Kent (136)

Emphasizing the apparently proto-Jamesian perspective of Gray as the sensitive outsider, the detached returning American with too much imagination and too little business sense, most critical readings of *The Ivory Tower* tend to underplay or only casually acknowledge the presence of Rosanna Gaw. Take, for instance, Alan Bellringer's appraisal of Rosanna's narrative function:

> Rosanna is certainly nobody's fool, but kind and simple, a clear-eyed moral force. She has the American girl's simplicity without her innocence, and, though she lacks the aesthetic refinement to be at the Jamesian center for long, the novel opens most promisingly in her hands. Essentially she records a situation, rather than registers the impression of a cultivated taste; and one of the advantages which James gets from using her point of view is that he can approach his subject of money openly. (243–44)

But if Rosanna is not "at the Jamesian center for long" in the plans for the novel, she does occupy crucial structural space, taking up the narrative perspective in both the first and last books. In his plans for the completed text, James looked forward to the "'aesthetic' ravishment" of

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making "Book 10 [the final book] balance with Book 1 as Rosanna's affair" (254), the narrative perspective being "given, with a splendid richness and comprehensiveness" (255) to her. He describes how the return to an "admirable Indian summer" in these same scenes "brings [him] round and makes the circle whole" (257).

Rosanna's informing placement at the margins of the text, I would suggest, offers more than just an approach to the "subject of money." Rather, her structural encirclement of the novel's action formally plays out her partly self-imposed marginalization from the novel's elite social networks, her "brooding apart, so to speak; out of the circle and on her own ground" (238). Indeed, Rosanna's narrative perspective, rather than merely "record[ing] a situation," is shot through with a complex awareness of the complicated marginal social space she occupies as a fat subject, "ring[ing] the margins" of the novel's noncorpulent selves. At the same time, her structural ringing of the text also evokes the novel's repeated association of bodily mass, "total rotundity," and encirclement—characters in the novel repeatedly negotiate their corporeal presence through evasively circling round, violently encircling or being encircled, enclosed, by others. Indeed, James's notes suggest that the notion of encirclement was central to his vision of how other characters would fill out the central presence of Graham Fielder:

> His "culture," his initiations of intelligence and experience, his possibilities of imagination, if one will, to say nothing of other things, make for me a sort of figure of a floating island on which he drifts and bumps and coasts about, wanting to get alongside as much as possible, yet always with the gap of water, the little island fact, to be somehow bridged over. [. . .] It isn't centrally a drama of fools or vulgarians; it's only circumferentially and surroundedly so—these being enormously implied and with the effect of their hovering and pressing upon the whole business from without, but seen and felt by us only with that rich indirectness. (247–48)

Gray's status as a "floating island"—a "little island" at that—in the novel's figurative geography points to how his fate in America will be "circumferentially and surroundedly" inscribed by his placement against the "hovering and pressing" embodiments of wealth, leisure, and excess. In this concern with circumference and encirclement, the "enormously im-

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plied" rotund body figures emblematically, I wish to suggest, as a site of both "pressing" entrapment and exciting, "rich" expansion or spillage.[10] Physical roundness and the aesthetic act of "bring[ing]" the novel "round" (257) are, for James, intimately linked.[11]

While Rosanna's circling around the Betterman estate at the start of the novel figures her fatness and misfittedness, encirclement is also key to how James renders Newport's fattening threat to Gray. Hence, Cissy warns Rosanna to protect Gray "when we close round him in the way that, in your place, as I assure you, I would certainly do everything to prevent" (51). While he is "addicted" to "avoidances" prior to his arrival at Newport, Gray's entrance onto the American scene leaves him "suddenly abandoned [. . .] to the effect of his being surrounded only" (60) with other people's reasons. Indeed, Gray's play with the figure of the "ivory tower" as an object for his withdrawal from society also rhetorically opens him to being encircled by observers. When Gray protests to Horton Vint that he will burrow himself away from those prying into how he manages himself in the wake of his inheritance, Vint teases him with the suggestion that his "hole will become then the feature of the scene, and we shall crowd a thousand deep all round the edge of it" (155). Just as Rosanna's circling of the Betterman estate suggests fat marginalization, Gray's encirclement, and the pressure placed on him to "grow big," suggest fatness as a product of social surveillance, as both a motive for and effect of the gaze. Thus the contrast between James's arch references to Rosanna's "misfit" and the more abstract concern with Gray's alienation and objectification might speak, once more, to the novel's attention to the fat female body as a site for satire.

Beyond these interlinked treatments of circling and bodily surveillance, however, circling in James's novel also connects roundness and ethical autonomy. Rosanna's opening movements, as we have seen, could be read as an evasion of the constrictive "forms" of social relations among the leisured elite of Newport. Such movement recurs when, selecting the tower as a gift for Gray, Rosanna "circle[s]" at "a distance for a time, allowing him now *his* free contemplation" (106). Similarly, Gray seeks to resist the threatening enclosure of surveillance when he also traces out a circle at the close of the fragment. In the opening chapter of the abandoned book 4, Gray paces, musing over his "sense of exposure" (197) in the wake of the will's bequest, a sense exacerbated by his feeling of abandonment when Rosanna fails to attend Betterman's interment. Gray is left with

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the "impression" of "a queer force in his view of Rosanna as above all somehow wanting, off and withdrawn verily to the pitch of her having played him some trick, merely let him in where she was to have seen him through" (197).[12] With this in mind, Gray "drop[s] upon the lawn and renew[s] his motion there":

> He circled round the house altogether at last, looking at it more critically than had hitherto seemed relevant, taking the measure, disconcertedly, of its unabashed ugliness, and at the end coming to regard it very much as he might have eyed some monstrous modern machine, one of those his generation was going to be expected to master, to fly in, to fight in, to take the terrible women of the future out for airings in, and that mocked at his incompetence in such matters while he walked round and round it and gave it, as for dread of what it might do to him, the widest berth his enclosure allowed. (197–98)

While this prophetic passage is often quoted, few readers have recognized the parallel it sets in play between Gray's circling the Betterman mansion and Rosanna's circuitous "misfit" at the start of the fragment. But if Gray's detached circling recalls Rosanna's sense of marginalization, this is repetition with a difference. Orbiting the Betterman estate, Gray's longing for personal autonomy, his desire for the "widest berth," in fact, builds on an equation of Newport's threatening capitalism with female monstrosity: the house evokes some "monstrous modern machine," an embodiment of the desire of "the terrible women of the future." Evoking the novel's opening mechanistic vision of Rosanna as a "big ship" (14), as a "large, loose" subject unaccountable to society's notions of what constitutes "a 'figure'" (5), the house's "unabashed ugliness" reduces Gray to a sense of "dread[ed]" impotence even as he appears to pace out an independent path. As such, Gray's circling restages *The Ivory Tower*'s appropriation of the corpulent body as a figure for both aesthetic gains and losses in an age of unprecedented expansion.

At the end of the final complete chapter of *The Ivory Tower,* Gray, waking from his contemplative circling, realizes he *"wasn't* alone with his monster" when, looking to the house, "connections fairly glittered, swarming out at him, in the person of Mr. Bradham, who stood at the top of a flight of steps from the gallery." Davey Bradham's reappearance offers Gray "some pertinence of presence, of promise":

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> It came over him with extraordinary quickness that the way not to fear the massed ambiguity was to trust it, and this florid, solid, smiling person, who waved a prodigious gold-coloured straw hat as if in sign of ancient amity, had come exactly at that moment to show him how. (198)

Critics tend to link James's decision to break off midway through the opening sentence of the next book to his traumatized response to the onset of war on the Continent and his sense of aesthetic misfit, writing of Newport's leisured classes at a time of urgent and violent action. While James's failure to continue with *The Ivory Tower* could be understood in this way, his ceasing at this particular point speaks more, I would suggest, to how Gray's movement parallels the movement of the text. Recalling James's mantra for "tightly packing" and encircling the beautifully excessive flow of his material for the novel, Gray's ambivalent orbit around the Betterman estate and his eventual surrender to the pull of Davey's "pertinence of presence" reflect the author's own circular and encircling management of his work, the "artful [. . .] rotundity" James envisaged for the completed text. At the same time, as he trusts the "massed ambiguity," Gray's move toward the "florid, solid, smiling" Davey fittingly indicates how Gray's future would have been shaped both by a circling at a distance from and a gravitating toward the fat body. With Rosanna's supposed desertion launching Gray's vexed wanderings at the margins of Newport's wealth, this scene restages how rhetorical engagements with monstrous expense work through projections of the fat female's body beyond herself, even in absence. Gray's movements capture James's own narrative shifts between repulsion from and attraction to Rosanna's fatness, as a site both of ethically "elephantine" capacity and of grotesque excess. Pausing at a moment of evasive yet containing encirclement, James's fragment leaves the reader poised at the margins of "massed ambiguity."

Notes

1. James's 1914 notes for *The Ivory Tower* are printed after the text of the novel in the present edition.

2. The rhetoric of weight appears to be crucial to James's structural vision of the novel: early in his notes he marks out "the great inevitable and desirable preponderance, in the Series [of "aspects" or narrative perspectives], of Gray's particular weight" (205).

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3. Perhaps surprisingly, given recent scholarship's interest in the erotic potentialities of the Jamesian body and in the material contexts of James's "fourth phase" productions (especially *The American Scene* and the autobiographies), *The Ivory Tower,* with its bodily narrative, remains relatively untouched by contemporary critics. Most of the key commentaries on the novel—by the likes of Alan Bellringer, Peter Buitenhuis, and John Carlos Rowe—tend to focus on James's critique of American capitalism, his return to the international theme, and especially his central trope of the ivory tower (recalling his handling of the similarly iconic forms of the dove in *The Wings of the Dove* and the eponymous golden bowl). For a more recent return to these themes, see Robert L. Caserio.

4. Invitingly, in a passing footnote, Griffin notes that "Catherine's weight is anomalous in James's fiction; only in the unfinished *Ivory Tower* is a major female character other than slender" (137).

5. Otten argues that "James continually translates his interest in the concrete into figures that presuppose the body's presence, even as that body is nearly cancelled, effaced, fined down to the ontologically nebulous state of mere nuance, denied" (8). Otten's location of the "problem of the body," at once visceral and disowned, at "the conceptual center of James's poetics" (9) offers a valuable general framework for reading the more specific representational "problem" of the fat body, with its particular effacements and exposures in a fat-phobic world, at the center of *The Ivory Tower.*

6. Recent critical reappraisals of the discursive circulation of fatness as a spectacular site of monstrosity and deformity owe much to developments in the field of disability studies. For instance, Rosemary Garland Thomson traces the disabled body through literary characters who "usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability's cultural resonance" (9).

7. These descriptions recall James's account of the "florid creations" along the New Jersey shoreline in *The American Scene:*

> The huge new houses, up and down, looked over their small, short lawns as with a certain familiar prominence in their profiles, which was borne out by the accent, loud, assertive, yet benevolent withal, with which they confessed to their extreme expensiveness.
> (*Travel Writings* 2: 362)

While it is beyond the scope of this essay, James's American travelogue also works through a rhetorical handling of the large female body. For example, in one of book's oddest and especially charged figures, James describes "the

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American social order in the guise of a great blank unnatural mother, [. . .] whose large unseeing complacency suggest[s] some massive monument covered still with the thick cloth that precedes a public unveiling" (2: 709).

8. In these early notes (1909–1910) Rosanna Gaw's place in the narrative (she is absent from the early version of the novel) appears to be taken by the eponymous Mrs. Max (whose real name is Mrs. Drabney), the mother of the novel's hero, Maxwell Drabney. This early linking of drabness, size ("max"), and maternal presence paves the way for Rosanna's assumption of those characteristics in the reworked narrative of 1914.

9. Indeed, James's wavering valuations of expansion, waste, containment, and consumption also return throughout the "copious commentary" (*Literary Criticism* 2: 1120) of his prefaces to the New York Edition. For instance, in introducing *The Awkward Age,* James traces "the quite incalculable tendency of a mere grain of subject-matter to expand and develop and cover the ground." The "unforeseen principle of growth" behind such works leads James to label them "comparative monsters," but he notes, with self-conscious irony, that he would "perhaps resent it" if such a title were "applied by another critic." Moving between celebration and muted criticism of his textual accretions, James goes on to suggest his "subject was probably condemned in advance to appreciable, or more exactly perhaps to almost preposterously appreciative, overtreatment" (2: 1134).

10. My discussion of James's concern with narrative encirclement, with an ambivalent exchange between margin and center, might be compared with Daniel Mark Fogel's seminal discussion of James's romantic "spiral" dialectic, a narrative structure in which the "goal is a synthesis incorporating the origin and its antitheses in a new whole that at once annuls, preserves, and transcends distinction" (4). While my reading of *The Ivory Tower* points to a possible conclusion in which Gray's and Rosanna's fates as fattening and fat subjects might be resolved through troubled synthesis, my tracing of physical acts of circling in the novel point how such movements are both liberating and threatening for James's spatial and corporeal imagination.

11. In related but more general terms, Thomas J. Otten argues that "the Jamesian body is defined by a wavering distinction between center and periphery" in which "what is central about [the] body is what happens at its edges" (18). For Otten, this peripheral vision points to how the celebrated "center of consciousness" in James's work "is literally inconceivable without a material outline that hovers at its edges and defines its furthest reaches" (19).

12. For Beverly Haviland, this realization plays out James's vision of the collapse of "heterosocial" relations, built on a sense of gender difference at that time (168).

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"Things That Happen and What We Say About Them": Speaking the Ordinary in DeLillo's *The Names*

Matthew Mutter

Near the end of Don DeLillo's *The Names,* Owen Brademas is recounting his childhood experience with glossolalia. The scene is a charismatic church in the Midwest; his parents are full of the Spirit, but he himself cannot summon a spiritual tongue, and indeed is paralyzed by the preacher's unrelenting rhetoric. The reader receives the language of this preacher indirectly, mediated by the narrator:

> There is a Spirit lurking here. Show me the scripture that says we have to speak English to know the joy of talking freely to God. Ridiculous, we say. There's no such document. Paul to the Corinthians said men can speak with the tongues of angels. In our time we can do the same. (306)

One does not think to question the preacher's scholarship, but he has made a mistake, and the mistake is emblematic of the specious ambitions of language in the novel as a whole. The mistake involves the subtle falsification of Saint Paul's words. What his first letter to the Corinthians actually says is this: "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal" (13:1). Speaking with the tongues of angels is spoken of only as a possibility, and the possibility itself operates only as a provocation to foreground its superior: love. In this scene, however, Owen is cut off from such intersubjective

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possibilities. Unable to speak and tempted to begin striking himself, he flees the church into the rain outside. That the preacher's aspiration for language to achieve total metaphysical transparency—a condition of expression proper to the angels—is a source of social alienation for a young boy implies a critique of such aspiration. Its trajectory overshoots what the novel sees as the proper habitation of language: the ordinary world of human relations. James Axton, the narrator and main protagonist, knows this by the end of the book, when he says, "This is what love comes down to, things that happen and what we say about them" (312). The breadth of this definition marks the growing identity of language itself with love, and the coincidence of both with attention to ordinary experience.

Much of the early criticism of *The Names* understood the novel as a postmodern exploration of language's possibilities and deficiencies, its fecundity and indeterminacy. For Paula Bryant, at stake in the novel was "a language system which refuses to fulfill its implied promise to define reality, let alone allow [one] to communicate with others to [one's] satisfaction" (18). This paradigm is still current; its most compelling recent spokesman is David Cowart, who reads *The Names* along the lines of his general account, in which DeLillo's aesthetic

> suggests a recognition that language will always resist and betray attempts by the unsubtle to make it a transparent medium, a window on the world of things. Immured in language, one has . . . only words to play with—words that refer to other words and such reality as words may construct, but never to the world in its extralinguistic integrity. (2)

This model of criticism tends to focus on what language *cannot* do in DeLillo's novels, on its persistent thwarting of our expressive and hermeneutic aspirations. I want to make the case that while *The Names* cannot be understood without these insights, it moves beyond them as it strives to narrow the gap between our hopes for language and what it accomplishes. In doing this it explores not only language's slippery "refusals" but also the psychological and moral conditions that animate the very expectations we place on it. The novel moves, in other words, from a delineation of our frustration to an inquiry into whether we should be frustrated at all.

I want to suggest that after staging an implicit struggle between competing conceptions of language, *The Names* affirms a vision in which language is, before all else, the fertile domain of our response to the

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ordinary world. The novel finally manifests a trust in the capacities of language and casts doubt on the quest for linguistic purification. Taking the novel as a dialectical whole, its concerns are therefore remarkably congruous with those of ordinary-language philosophy, which emerged with the later writings of Wittgenstein, gained prominence through the work of philosophers like J. L. Austin and Gilbert Ryle, and continues to animate thinkers like Stanley Cavell, Stephen Mulhall, and others in the pragmatist tradition interested in the intersection of language, embodiment, and ordinary experience. I employ some of these philosophers to illuminate *The Names* partly because, in their understanding, language encodes what Wittgenstein calls "forms of life," and novels are the best places to go to find the representations of such forms. In saying this, I want to insist that *The Names* is not a mere "example" of the conceptual scheme of ordinary-language philosophy (indeed, this philosophy resists conceptual schemes altogether). On the contrary, this philosophy requires, for its very completion and intelligibility, the forms of life that a novel like *The Names* imagines.

This is not to say that DeLillo doesn't understand the human desire for signs to become transparent. This desire, as Stanley Cavell has noted, seems to be as entrenched in ordinary life as the ordinary discourse it renounces.[1] But the account of language coming from these traditions of reflection is startled by what language *can* do, by how it creates, sustains, and mediates a world of concrete social relations, and by how it can illuminate the world of objects. Wittgenstein writes:

> When I talk about language (words, sentences, etc.) I must speak the language of every day. Is this language somehow too coarse and material for what we want to say? *Then how is another one to be constructed?*—And how strange that we should be able to do anything at all with the one we have!
>
> . . . . . .
>
> I should like to say: you regard it much too much as a matter of course that one can tell anything to anyone.[2] (48–49, 114)

In *The Names* Owen and the cult mistrust language, while the novel itself, simultaneously attending to and transcending this mistrust, is finally possessed of Wittgensteinian wonder in the face of multiple linguistic suspicions. It transmutes the mysticism born of linguistic skepticism—a mysticism that retreats to the margins of experience—into a sense of mys-

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tery derived from the unexpected alignment of language with ordinary human concerns.

My analysis shares a good deal with recent work on the book, especially James Berger's fascinating work on the turn against language in novels like *The Names* and Amy Hungerford's attention to the sacrality of small talk in the novel. *Terrorism* and *transcendence* are the terms Berger uses to decribe the strategies examined in the novel to overcome the "brokenness" of language, the crisis of signification that is history as such. He reads the impulse toward terror represented in *The Names* as a desire to rebuild the tower of Babel, "to reestablish what is imagined as a language without ambiguity, the language of Adam" (342). This essay too will argue that *The Names* explores the imperative to restore to language an innocence in which signification is stable and there is no disparity between word and thing or word and act. I want to claim, however, that the novel is concerned to anatomize the motives behind this imperative, critique them, and offer an alternate vision that returns language to the ordinary world, and the ordinary world to language. Another way of saying this is that I am making a distinction between what the novel explores and what it validates.[3] The rage to purify or transcend language is, I believe, presented as a temptation that must be resisted. It is an understandable temptation, given the ontological pain of finitude and the historical miseries generated by language's facilitation of political domination. But although both language and ordinary life are broken, their intersection is the site where human concerns, and the lament of brokenness itself, can be articulated. The novel works to overcome the temptation to retreat from the language of every day because the end of language is found to be the incarnation of a time-bound, embodied community of speech that strives to be faithful to its interlocutors and its objects. Words cannot, for DeLillo, be abstracted from the embodied voices from which they proceed and toward which they are oriented. They always partake of the contingency of persons and bodies and history—the raw materials of ordinary life. They must bear the residue of both the past and their surroundings.

The recovery of the ordinary not only involves a reorientation toward what is given, it also implies a task. For DeLillo, marriage is the great scene of this task. "Marriage is something," James Axton, the narrator of *The Names* claims, "we make from available materials" (39). It is a way of doing things with what is given, as DeLillo's play "The Mystery at the Middle

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of Ordinary Life" reiterates 20 years later.[4] But what becomes typical in the play—an acknowledgment that domestic speech is the mysterious vehicle by which bodies and objects are made meaningful, and intimacy is made possible, between two people—was first particular in *The Names.* In the play, this sort of speech not only overcomes the damage wrought by boredom and banality but is unexpectedly enhanced when those conditions generate argument. Axton often returns to this insight in *The Names,* as when he finds a strange copiousness in a difficult moment with his wife Kathryn:

> The argument had resonance. It had levels, memories. It referred to other arguments, to cities, houses, rooms, those wasted lessons, our history in words. In a way, our special way, we were discussing matters of what it meant to be a couple, to share that risk and distance. . . . But it was there, a desperate love, the conscious hovering sum of things. It was part of the argument. It was the argument. (123).

The novel juxtaposes this "history in words" with the aspirations of the cult, which, we are told, wants to inaugurate, through the work of linguistic purification, "a place where it is possible for men to *stop* making history" (209, my emphasis). While nothing clings to the words of the cult, in this strained marriage words harbor layers of experience, whole scenes of lives shared. Indeed, in the shape of discussion they do more than simply harbor: they actually constitute the "sum of things," which, we are told, is not just *part* of the argument but indistinguishable from the argument itself. Even in a practice of language characterized by dissonance, the language itself hides an aspiration toward love, or what Cavell calls language's fundamental disclosure of an "attunement with one another" (*Quest* 147).

This is not the only moment in the novel where language is identified with conversation, conversation with argument, and argument with love. James Axton, who is living in Greece, thinks of the people he encounters: "If I ever learn the language, I'll speak it as often as possible. I want to talk to them, I want to hear what they're saying. These men arguing, there's something serious, almost loving about it" (42). James constantly returns to this idea of language as love, as the cadence of ordinary intimacy. A longer meditation on this soon follows:

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> People everywhere are absorbed in conversation. Seated under trees, under striped canopies in the squares, they bend together over food and drink, their voices darkly raveled in Oriental laments that flow from radios in basements and back kitchens. Conversation is life, language is the deepest being. We see the patterns repeat, the gestures drive the words. It is the sound and picture of humans communicating. It is talk as a definition of itself. Talk. Voices out of doorways and open windows, voices on the stuccoed-brick balconies, a driver taking both hands off the wheel to gesture as he speaks. Every conversation is a shared narrative, a thing that surges forward, too dense to allow space for the unspoken, the sterile. The talk is unconditional, the participants drawn in completely.
>
> This is a way of speaking that takes such pure joy in its own openness and ardor that we begin to feel these people are discussing language itself. What pleasure in the simplest greeting. It's as though one says to another, "How good it is to say, 'How are you?'" The other replying, "When I answer 'I am well and how are you,' what I really mean is that I'm delighted to have a chance to say these familiar things—they bridge the lonely distances." (52–53)

Maurice Blanchot has said that "silence is what we prefer for speaking of the mystery" (59). Yet here the "unspoken" is the "sterile." Language does not hover over being, incapable of penetrating its surfaces, but is itself the "deepest being." James's reflection is the articulation of an astonishment over the capacity of language to create and sustain relationships. It is important to clarify this phenomenon: what we have is not language discussing itself—its dreaded self-referentiality—but *people* "discussing language itself": discussing its fecund manifestation of its patrons' concerns. What is at stake in talk's reflexivity is a model of language grounded in its human value—its capacity to produce, in James's idiom, the "good" and "delightful" among people. The measure of language is the pleasure it gives; if "meanings" here become unmoored from their material signs and sounds, this is because the language is drifting not so much into mystical elasticity or referential confusion as into a serious form of play. The conversationalists are discussing language as the condition for the enrichment of intersubjectivity.

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In order to distinguish this mode of "discussing language itself" from similar phenomena in the life of the cult, it is worth juxtaposing this passage with an account that Singh, one of the cult members, gives of the operation of words in the desert. He tells James:

> My mind works better in the desert. My mind is a razed tablet out here. Everything counts in the desert. The simplest word has enormous power. This is fitting because it's part of the Indian tradition. The word in India has enormous power. Not what people mean but what they say. Intended meaning is beside the point. The word itself is all that matters. (294)

The interest in "what people say" seems to deliver a world of ordinary language, and the attempt to distinguish between what is said and what is meant recalls James's observations on the cafe conversation. But Singh's claims redefine the quality of "language itself." In James's reflections, the fact that word content is less relevant to these familiar locutions than the process of "saying" does not mean that language is operating as pure form. Agency matters: though intention is certainly not to be thought of as some meaning that resides in the mind before the use of words, it nonetheless helps us to locate what is meant in a way that the words themselves cannot. For Singh words are isolated from intention, detached from the occasion of their employment. Only the word "matters." The human interests that both generate and are disclosed in words are invisible.[5]

To say this is to say that Singh and the cult evacuate "matters" from matter. James, on the other hand, intuits the complex relation that ordinary embodiment and speech enjoy. After a sustained absence from his family, he is speaking to Kathryn about the death of her father, something they have spoken of before:

> This talk we were having about familiar things was itself ordinary and familiar. It seemed to yield up the mystery that is a part of such things, the nameless way in which we sometimes feel our connections to the physical world. *Being here.* Everything is where it should be. Our senses are collecting at the primal edge. The woman's arm trailing down a shroud, my wife, whatever her name. I felt I was in an early stage of teenage drunkenness, lightheaded, brilliantly happy and stupid, knowing the real meaning of every word. The deck gave off a dozen smells. (32)

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The provocative confusion of his description is evident in the tension between the "nameless" character of this experience and his sense that central to it is "knowing the real meaning of every word." Mystery is nameless but somehow also productive of precise nomination. The intensification of sensory experience seems to partake of the "primal," yet the primal is not the preverbal, the innocence of meaning. The body's knowledge is not opposed to speech. "The woman's arm trailing down a shroud" seems to be the image of an ancient woman practicing some primal funeral rite, and James experiences the sense of mystery inasmuch as his wife evokes such an image, a continuous identity across time. Yet his wife's identity, despite the unfalsifiable knowledge of familiarity, is also peculiarly effaced in this emotional connection: "my wife, whatever her name." James's experience seems to be akin to what Freud calls the uncanny—anything we experience in adulthood that reminds us of earlier psychic stages or aspects of our unconscious life, but also of the primitive experience of the human species.

Indeed, James seems to be experiencing what Stanley Cavell calls "the uncanniness of the ordinary" (*Quest* 154), the extraordinary quality of consciousness engendered by the defamiliarization of ordinary life. Freud's uncanny was already located in the ordinary: the term *unheimlich* implies a tension between at-homeness and not-at-homeness.[6] Cavell's version of this uncanny, however, involves something active: an acceptance or affirmation. What is for Freud "a return of the familiar" is for Cavell "a return of what we accept as the world" (*Quest* 166). This is something James will experience over and over in the novel, as when he says to Eliades while eating a peach, "ordinary things aren't supposed to be this gratifying" (56).[7] As Cavell writes:

> [T]he uncanniness of the ordinary is epitomized by the possibility or threat of what philosophy has called skepticism . . . as the capacity, even desire, of ordinary language to repudiate itself, specifically to repudiate its power to word the world, to apply to the things we have in common, or to pass them by. (*Quest* 164)

Ordinary language and being become uncanny when, out of the atmosphere of skepticism—the kind of skepticism about the value of the objects and words of the world exemplified by Owen and the cult—one returns to find the power of words and acts in all their commonality and regularity. Yet it is not the experience of the uncanniness of the ordinary

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itself that is sought; rather, uncanniness is the beginning of a project of consecration, what Cavell calls the "diurnal devotedness" (*Quest* 176) that finds satisfaction in ordinary things. Near the end of the novel, geographically abstracted from the bodies and daily movements of those he loves, James wants to see his wife and son "down to the weave of their Shetland sweaters. What I needed was a sense of the present, their living days, the things around them" (312). While Freud's uncanny might tempt a return to the mystical purity of ancient origins buried in the unconscious, the return to the ordinary requires "a sense of the present."

This distinction is important because the allure of the unconscious and preverbal, especially when opposed to language in all its historical accretions and contexts, is constant throughout the novel. But it is exposed ultimately as a dangerous dream. The cult is precisely and bureaucratically murderous. Its preoccupation with alphabets and languages is, paradoxically, a desire for absolute, preverbal meaning. The leader, Andahl, tells James:

> Something in our method finds a home in your unconscious mind. A recognition. This curious recognition is not subject to conscious scrutiny. Our program evokes something that you seem to understand and find familiar, something you cannot analyze. We are working at a pre-verbal level, although we use words, of course, we use them all the time. (208)

Andahl employs the rhetoric of the familiar—indeed, of the uncanny—on behalf of an enterprise that negates the actual, human familiar. For the cult's work is a work of extremity that is stimulated only when approaching limits and boundary spaces. The recognition of which Andahl speaks ostensibly follows from some Gnostic memory of the former linguistic utopia of Eden. Their desire is for perfect origins, for letters and words to operate as if the world were not fallen. Resisting a recalcitrant, contingent world beyond their control, they want to escape the contingency of history, to catalyze a new beginning, to create a "place where it is possible for men to stop making history" (210). They are, Andahl tells James, "Learners of the alphabet. Beginners." At bottom, theirs is a moral evasion, a refusal to encounter and live in the world as it is given to them. Refuge is found in what is secret rather than what is linguistically common or public, in what Cavell calls words' "power . . . to apply to the things we have in common." As Andahl insists, "The secret name is a way of escaping the world. It is an opening into the self."

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Owen Brademas too has the dream of an innocent, transparent language. A return to alphabetic origins is necessary because, he thinks, "The deep past is the only innocence and therefore necessary to retain" (304). Early in the novel, Owen emerges as great conversationalist, a version (perhaps the most human version) of the idiosyncratic theorist of cultural detail that we find in many DeLillo novels. His themes are "memory, solitude, obsession," and "death" (20). Yet Owen's conversations often seem more like soliloquies, and as the novel progresses he becomes increasingly isolated. His growing enthrallment with the cult runs parallel to his project of revisiting, in memory, the trauma of his linguistic failure as a boy. In Owen's final attempt to transfigure his early experience with glossolalia, the search for alphabetic origins and charismatic ecstasy converge. The cult and the church become indistinguishable. What is at stake is

> a freedom, an escape from the condition of ideal balance. Normal understanding is surpassed, the self and its machinery obliterated. Is this what innocence is? Is it the language of innocence those people spoke, words flying out of them like spat stones? The deep past of men, the transparent word . . . It was necessary to remember, to dream the pristine earth. (307)

Words in this vision would not just represent but *be* stones, just as the cult strives to create a necessary relation between alphabetic representation and the act of murder. Owen repeats his benediction—"bless them"—twice, first to his charismatic forebears and then to the cult and their dream of linguistic innocence.[8] The cult "intended nothing, they meant nothing. They only matched the letters. What beautiful names" (308). Intentions and meanings are the gaps between signs and objects, the spaces of possible confusion that ensure the nonidentity of that which they mediate. The consummation of language—the transition from nonidentity to identity—would thus involve the evacuation of agency. The murders, in this understanding, were merely the smooth unfolding of a mystical linguistics, a perfection beyond will and passion.

Owen's last ruminations have the character of epiphany, but they remain determined by the question James asks about him a moment earlier, "What did he *almost* understand?" (284; my emphasis). He has not understood that he can only communicate his very linguistic longing to another person in terrestrial analogies. Thus James recounts the paradox of Owen's explanation of his attraction to the cult: "What could he say

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about the attraction? Nothing that did not take the form of an example from the physical world, preferably a remote and not easily observed part of it, to suggest the edge of perception" (286). Words can't escape physicality, and the physical world that they appropriate is not a private world.[9] The meaning of Owen's desire for extremity is itself constituted by the familiar, the accessible. Even in these last thoughts about the charismatic congregation, his very criterion for falsification is the idea that language cannot be authentic if it is socially mediated. As he said earlier of those who speak in tongues, before his benediction, "It is a learned behavior, fabricated speech, meaningless speech." (173). Owen's either/or logic here is that learned, socially grounded speech is fundamentally "meaningless" speech because it lacks absolute creative reference, but the tongues are actually not meaningless, for although their meaning may not be angelic, they are pregnant with all kinds of human desires and expectations. For Owen, if speech does not derive from and reach back into the absolute—an absolute known through deep, preverbal pattern—it has no meaning. He is never able to comprehend that the rage for the "secret aspect" of letters is a rage to remove the social, human content from words and sentences, and that this is the source of its cruelty.[10] The slow reduction of conversations to sentences, sentences to words, and words to letters, is the gradual dehumanization of language. What Owen calls "the importance of letters as such" (35) is not a *human* importance.

That Owen has slowly lost the sense of the human is evident when James first finds him in India, a few days before Owen will go into the desert. He is reclining in his small, empty room in Bombay:

> He was reading when I entered and looked up to regard me in a speculative manner, trying to balance my physical make-up, my shape, proportions, form, with some memory he carried of a name and a life. A moment in which I seemed to hang between two points in time, a moment of silent urging. (274)

Bodies and names have become so separate for Owen that he struggles to identify his friend. The silent, timeless moment in which James is suspended partakes of what the cult member Emmerich will soon call for Owen "an alphabet of utter stillness" (292). The intersection of naming and personal being mapped across time, which we call a life, is difficult for Owen to bring to mind. But what James learns in these final conversations with Owen runs counter to Owen's model of linguistic pursuit:

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"This is what I was learning from the objects in the room and the spaces between them, from the conscious solace he was devising in things. I was learning when to speak, in what manner." (308). He is learning when and how to speak—pragmatic concerns of speech grounded in the struggle to love Owen. He is learning, as Cavell has written, that "we need to remind ourselves of *what we should say when*" (*Must We Mean* 20; Cavell's emphasis). And the very surroundings that Owen ignores, the objects and the spaces between them, lend interpretive counsel to James. In the same way that he will understand the Parthenon at the end of the novel, James suggests that all of Owen's historical and metaphysical speculations about language point toward one very ordinary human end: solace. This is Tap's insight as well, when in his novel he writes of Owen's "pityfull mouth" (338). The power of this misspelled word is its transference of significance from Owen's sealed mouth as a site of failed transcendence to Owen's mouth as a potential object and source of love, a love that is frustratingly absent.

While it might seem that the cult's search for a linguistic Eden is simply a search for a world in which the act of naming discloses the object to the self with a renewed immediacy, their interest in naming is actually an interest in power. In reference to the cult, Vosdanik tells James about "the ancient custom of scratching an enemy's name on a piece of pottery, then smashing it" (170). They want to use words as instruments of magic, not as a response to material life but as a means of manipulating it. Their logic can, I think, be illuminated by Maurice Blanchot's discussion of naming and magic. Blanchot argues:

> Primitive man knows that the possession of words gives him mastery over things, but for him the relationship between words and the world is so close that the manipulation of language is as difficult and as fraught with peril as contact with living beings: the name has not yet emerged from the thing. (322)

Our relation to language, however, is still magical. The emergence of "the name" removes the speaker from this peril, but at the expense of the object, which the name "annihilates":

> The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness, what is left of it when it has lost being—the very fact that

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> it does not exist. . . . Hegel . . . writes, "The first act, by which Adam established his lordship over the animals, is this, that he gave them a name, i.e., he nullified them as beings on their own account, and made them into ideal entities." . . . The meaning of speech, then, requires that before any word is spoken, there must be a sort of immense hecatomb, a preliminary flood plunging all of creation into a total sea. God had created living things, but man had to annihilate them. Not until then did they take on meaning for him, and he in turn created them out of the death into which they had disappeared. (322–23)

What the cult does is to take the process Blanchot describes a step further by combining these two mythical moments. They want to recover the magical efficacy of language—the point of the murders is the ostensible capacity of words to manipulate the world—but this efficacy is recovered through a literalization of the project of annihilation described by Blanchot and Hegel as inherent in the act of naming.[11] They do not just deprive people of their being by making them ideal entities but also strive to overcome the condemnation of which Blanchot speaks by using names to deprive them of their existence. The name is returned to the object, as for Blanchot's primitive, but the dangerous uncertainty of material otherness has been subjugated by sheer control.

Blanchot's vision of the agon between namer and object is a far cry from the avowals of ordinary language. In the Genesis narrative, Adam's experience of naming is prelapsarian, but for Blanchot naming is already an act of violence. *The Names* suggests the possibility of a different account altogether: names can actually achieve a rich relation to objects in a context of receptivity and intersubjective affirmation. What gives a name depth is its shared association. Novelist and philosopher Walker Percy writes:

> Naming or symbolization may be defined as the affirmation of the thing as being what it is under the auspices of the symbol. When the child understands that by the word "ball" his father means the round thing, his understanding is of the nature of a yes-saying. Helen Keller's memorable revelation was the affirmation of the water as being what it is. But an affirmation requires two persons, the namer and the hearer. This is water, means that this is water *for you and for me.* Only a person may say yes, and he may say it only to another person.[12] (134)

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Naming here is by nature the affirmation, not the annihilation, of the being of a thing. It is a yes-saying. The person who names receives the objects of the world as a kind of gift. The cult, however, despises ordinary objects. Their natural habitat is the desert in all its seeming emptiness, its resistance to history. As Singh tells Owen, "Everything counts in the desert, the simplest words have enormous power" (294). The Yezidi alphabet, one of Owen's own fascinations, was created, he says, in the desert: "Simple, inevitable. No wonder it happened in the desert" (295).[13] The power is a false one, however, and only obtains because in the desert, words do not seem to have to compete with objects, persons, historical debris. The desert is a hellish Eden where Adam can name things anew because everything is virginal, but things are virginal only because they are dead. This is austere space, contrasted with the "realized space" that graces ordinary Greece, in an image from the beginning of the novel: "Laundry hung in the walled gardens, always this sense of realized space, common objects, domestic life going on in that sculpted hush" (8). Words may resound in the desert, but they can never be realized, which requires their saturation of objects. "There is no light," James thinks, "except in objects" (232).

In this response to objects, DeLillo seems to inherit the modernist feeling recently examined by Douglas Mao:

> This feeling of regard for the physical object as object—as not-self, as not-subject, as most helpless and will-less of entities, but also as fragment of Being, as solidity, as otherness in its most resilient opacity—seems a peculiarly twentieth century malady or revelation. (4)

Objects have a similar status in *The Names,* resisting the encroachment of subjectivity in the form of linguistic domination through forced signification. "Objects," James insists, "are the limits we desperately need. They show us where we end. They dispel our sadness, temporarily" (133). They prevent the self from either devouring its surroundings or evaporating in the absence of borders. DeLillo, however, seems confident that objects can retain their integrity in being named. When Kathryn and Tap set sail for the Southern Islands, James takes pleasure in imagining that Tap "asks her the names of things, ship parts, equipment, and later they walk across the lower deck to trace the system of ropes and anchor chains" (134). The act of naming objects—even using banal taxonomies and mere dictionary definitions—enhances their being.[14]

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For his part, Owen has fled the mundane world of archaeology to pursue the entirely extraordinary, and in the process he has lost the objects of the world. Kathryn says of him, "Owen's in another world. He's left this one behind." Those who remain, however, "find objects. They tell us something . . . we find objects, we come upon features" (73). Kathryn is at home in the ordinary world of objects that are not simply referents of speech but interlocutors in their own right ("they tell us something"). The trenches she digs in evoke the depth of the objects she finds there, and the depth is not depleted but intensified by attention to their surfaces. Owen's anxious relation to surfaces is illuminated by his preference for the night, when the identity of things is blurred. He says, "I have a feeling about night. The things of the world are no longer discrete. All the day's layers and distinctions fade in the dark. Night is continuous" (81). If night is a release from the sometimes harsh outlines of day, it threatens to obscure individual objects, objects that bring the true and the real into mutual proximity, giving to stubborn resilience a quality we sometimes call truth. In response to Owen's comment, Kathryn says of night, "It doesn't matter whether we lie or tell the truth," and Owen replies, "Wonderful, yes, exactly." In the night words can become completely untethered, because ordinary objects or persons may no longer elicit our respect and responsibility.

In this way the night is analogous to the desert. Kathryn rejects the desert, and the desert's great representatives, the Egyptians, in favor of the Minoans, who model life lived in the ordinary. Minoa is, Kathryn says, "So different from Egypt and all that frowning sandstone and granite," the framework for "perpetual ego" (82). Instead, the Minoans "decorated household things. They saw the beauty in this. Plain objects." The body's ordinary functions, even its wastes, are not scorned. They had, she says, "Gorgeous plumbing." But Kathryn praises the ordinary life of the Minoans without artlessly ignoring the potential darkness beneath. When James tries to idealize them, she balks: "Don't go too far. There's the Minotaur, the labyrinth. Darker things. Beneath the lilies and antelopes and blue monkeys" (83). Unlike the cultists, who want a willed ascetic innocence, a return to pure origins ironically secured by the purgation of violence, and a self that is not sullied by the taint of history, Kathryn can affirm the ordinary without pretending that its wonder is unfallen. Her objects are both saturated with history and tinged with mystery.

David Bosworth, an early reviewer of DeLillo, has written:

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> Time and time again, with perhaps excessive thoroughness but undeniable eloquence, DeLillo impresses upon us his view that what matters about language is its "pattern," its deeper rhythms and syntax, the design behind the signs rather than what they signify. (30)

The pattern of language indeed has long been an obsession of DeLillo's, but *The Names* takes great pains to understand just what that "view" is. Or rather, one could say that *The Names* rethinks the question of language's relation to "what matters." Language in the novel becomes most fully itself when it discloses the matter of the world rather than absorbing it. When Owen says he is "safe from [him]self" (172) as long as there is a "pattern to observe," he assumes a binary: the individual either dissolves into the structual pattern or remains in isolation. But DeLillo suggests that the structural patterns of language only achieve significance when they are instantiated in performance by a self in a particular context with particular concerns. It is only when one is alienated from language as a gift of human affinity that one is able to see it as a pure pattern. Structure without individual appropriation is, in a sense, madness, as is its mirror image, individual meaning unrelated to structure. That is why Andahl, explaining to James why members of the cult seem to "lose purpose," says, "But know this. Madness is a structure. We might say that madness is all structure" (210). If *The Names* is partially, in Owen's words, "a story about how far men will go to satisfy a pattern" (80), it is in just this measure a story that doubts the pleasure (and the very possibility) of such satisfactions.

A conversation James has with Ann Maitland prompts him to think about language without a subject: "She used pitch as an element of meaning. What she said was beside the point. It was the cadences that mattered, the rise and fall of the ironic voice, the modulations, the stresses. What we lacked was a subject" (100). The first thing to note is that the patterns of sound become intelligible not within a state of mystical insight but rather within a conversation. What "matters" *is* something like design. But reference or signification are not thereby evacuated, for design still yields what James calls "meaning" and what could as easily be called understanding. It is tempting to speculate here that the social correlative of language as pattern is conversation without a subject. Richard Rorty has eloquently argued that this sort of subjectless conversation is the proper mode of philosophy and even of discourse in general. He writes that we should not

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think that "when we say something we must necessarily be expressing a view about a subject. We might just be *saying something*—participating in a conversation rather than contributing to an inquiry. Perhaps saying things is not always saying how things are" (371). We must, he continues,

> understand speech not only not as the externalizing of inner representations, but as not a representation at all. We have to drop the notion of correspondences for sentences as well as for thoughts, and see sentences as connected with other sentences rather than with the world. (372)

But for James and Ann, speech as pure pattern and conversation without a subject characterize only a portion of their encounter. The pattern actually seems to be a tactic for evading communication; we are told that her eyes will not meet his (100). What deepens their communication, moreover, is a consideration of the repetitions—the patterns—of ordinary life. Ann is considering the women of Beirut, whose ordinary tasks sustain human life in the midst of political chaos and violence: "During the worst of the fighting they kept on washing floors. They washed floors long after the floors were clean. The uniform motions, the even streaks. Unvarying things, she saw, must have deeper value than we know" (101). At this moment Ann and James find a "subject," the pain of a decayed marriage: "Her voice was her own now, reflective and balanced, connected to something. She learned forward to touch my hand. The world is here, I thought" (101). This new character of the conversation reveals the inadequacy of the speech without reference or subject previously described. Pure cadence left her voice disconnected and her self abstracted from her body. The connection of voice with human subject and touch gives them a "world," *this* world. Rorty's model seems insufficient; the world *is* disclosed in this conversation. The hovering, ironic note is abandoned. James and Ann achieve not the linguistic purity of form without content but speech as conversation that yields the world.[15]

The desire for language to be pure pattern is finally a desire to make language aspire to the condition of mathematics, for words to deliver the precision of numbers. "Numbers behave," the cult member Andahl tells James, "words do not" (208). Singh says of the cult's choice of a desert habitat, "It's like a mathematical solution applied to the affairs of the planet" (294). DeLillo had previously examined this project in *Ratner's Star,* and I think it is possible to read *The Names* as a kind of dialectical

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reponse to that novel of just a few years before. It seems to have gone unremarked that the philosophical framework of the cult is prefigured in the expostulations of Ratner himself, the scientist-mystic, who has come to believe in "the secret power of the alphabet, the unnameable name" (215). Ratner tells Billy, his humorously periphrastic translator, "If you know the right combination of letters, you can make anything. Meaningless sounds, abstract symbols, they have the power of creation" (226).[16] The second half of *Ratner's Star* focuses on the project of engineering a "pure" language called Logicon, which will far surpass the capacities of ordinary language.[17] Billy's notes read, "to avoid the associations commonly attached to certain words, we have renounced ordinary language" (392). In creating Logicon, they have "done much to eliminate imprecision, nuance, emotion, the variety of evocative 'meanings' that cling to spoken and written words." (In *The Names* DeLillo constantly interrogates the human distaste for that which "clings" and thus corrupts the hope for sleek transcendence. Singh says of the murders, "It's clean, you know? Nothing clings to the act. No hovering stuff" [302]. Yet James finally realizes, "Everything clings" [256].) Lester Bolin, another scientist working on Logicon, is certain that once it is completed "the meanings and relationships concealed by ordinary language would stand out sharply" (314).

The Names is concerned to bring this language project out of the laboratory and to examine its consequences in social and political life. The desired exactitude of pattern observed in the cult's murders, in which initials of names and places become interchangeable in a way that is totally arbitrary from the vantage point of language, begins to make sense as equivalencies possible in numeric systems. But language as math is finally about control and the eschewing of human contingency, the binding of unexpected flights of linguistic possibility. It is important that after having seemingly exhausted his subject in *Ratner's Star,* DeLillo gives us yet another mathematician in *The Names*—Peter, the son of Charles and Ann Maitland. James encounters him with his family at lunch. What at first appears to be a father's irritated ignorance of the chosen field of his son turns out to have more significance. When James complains to Charles that Peter refuses to explain what kind of mathematics he does, Charles says:

> There are certain things he can't discuss with his *professors.* It's too bloody rarefied. It makes no sense if you don't know the se-

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> crets, the codes. It means nothing, says nothing, refers to nothing, is in fact absolutely useless. . . . It doesn't bear on human experience . . . ordinary human language. (164)

(Recall Owen Brademas's last thoughts about the cult: they "intended nothing, they meant nothing.") "A man can't talk about these things," Charles tells James. This elite language code exists, like the cult, in secret and solitude. DeLillo does not think, of course, that mathematics is a dubious enterprise—the magnificent patterns it expresses are problematic only if they are seen as normative for language[18]—but the facility in ordinary human communication that Peter possesses has nothing to do with math. It is, rather, a product of his body and voice. As the meal comes to a close, James thinks of Charles and Ann:

> Peter had altered them not only by what he'd said but by a simple physical extension of the local figure they made. He was the apex, the revelation of full effect. He knew his mother's affairs, his father's weaknesses, and I felt in a sense he'd stolen these things from me. (165)

Revelation and knowledge come not through universal exactness of number but through particular bodies and their most basic creative property: offspring. By adopting geometrical terms ("extension," "figure," "apex") as metaphors in the midst of such a discussion, DeLillo subtly reclaims the territory of mathematics as a human province, a place where even abstractions are words that cannot escape their analogical connection to the earth. The figure these people make is local, and they require merely local, not absolute knowledge to be understood, knowledge that comes from word, gesture, and physical presence. One is tempted to call this DeLillo's hermeneutics of incarnation, where the Word made flesh is the "apex, the revelation of full effect."

James has one last bit of nostalgia for numbers. After the truth about his company's relation to the CIA and violent national interest has been established, he still looks at his files and thinks, "All those finely tuned calculations of ours, the grids of virgin numbers. It seemed almost innocent, really" (317). But the nostalgia for innocence and representational virginity has been exposed in this novel as thinly disguised violence. The final word on mathematics in the novel appears when the book has come full circle, with James ascending the Acropolis, which he resisted before.

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At the Parthenon he finds a kind of language that is crucially contrasted with mathematics:

> And this is what I learned up there, that the Parthenon was not a thing to study but to feel. It wasn't aloof, rational, timeless, pure. . . . I hadn't expected a human feeling to emerge from the stones but this is what I found, deeper than the art and mathematics embodied in the structure, the optical exactitudes. I found a cry for pity. This is what remains to the mauled stones in their blue surround, this open cry, this voice we know as our own. (330)

Tap found this same cry in the "pityfull" mouth of the young Owen, and James had found it in the long, discursive meetings with Andahl: "All he wanted was a chance to explain. . . . He was raising a call for human pity and forgiveness" (216). Undermining his own recondite theories of language, Andahl engaged in a public speech act that couldn't avoid meaning: a confession, a linguistic appeal for a response of forgiveness. At the Acropolis James finds the same thing. Everything that frustrates language's transparency—its lack of purity and "exactitude," its situatedness in time and space—is subordinated to language's great center: embodied human voice and the hope this voice holds for love and forgiveness. And this greatest of objects, the object that James feared would stifle him in its historical exaltation, turns out to be yet another object in relation to human beings that bear their residue of concern.

In an interview with Adam Begley, DeLillo said that *The Names* was "a book that marked the beginning of a new dedication" (284). If the ordinary and ordinary language have something to do with this dedication, these concerns also mark his subsequent fiction. In *White Noise,* for instance, we once again find a connection between violence and a purified state of signification that exists beyond words and names. In the exhilaration of Jack Gladney's attempt to kill Mink, he tells us, "I took out the Zumwalt. Great and nameless emotions thudded on my chest. I knew who I was in the network of meanings . . . I saw things new . . . I saw beyond words. I knew what red was, saw it in terms of dominant wavelength, luminance, purity" (298). But when Jack himself is shot, he reports, "The world collapsed inward, all those vivid textures and connections buried in mounds of ordinary stuff." This ordinary stuff gives the lie to a world of pure perception where knowledge is not mediated by

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words, in which identity and meaning no longer have to suffer the space between self and act. The world of pure meaning had become, as with the cult, a world of pure self, of a repeated *I:* "I took . . . I knew . . . I saw . . . I knew . . . I knew". The ordinary stuff returns the world—Mink in his stubborn otherness—to Gladney in its full externality.

The same recovery of the ordinary when faced with the lure of pure meaning occurs in *Mao II.* Terrorism and totalizing systems have very different registers in that novel, but they are opposed in similar ways by ordinary language. Blindfolded in a dark basement, a French poet kidnapped by terrorists longs for "The old stories tried and true. . . . The more banal, the more commonplace, the more predictable, the better" (111). Karen, a former member of the Unification Church, is still tempted by the "glow" (148) of totalizing projects like those of Mao or Khomeni or, appropriately, the *Sendero Luminoso.* She is intoxicated by their "intense white shadow" (148), but there is the possibility for her to "walk out of the glow and come into objects and surfaces and the words that we attach to them" (148). There is a different sort of glow in the repetition of the ordinary phrases that recur in the novelist Bill Gray's mind as he is dying:

> His father. Can you wait two shakes.
> His father. I keep telling you and telling you and telling you.
> His mother. I like it better with the sleeves rolled down.
>
> Measure your head before ordering.
> His father. We need to have a confab, Junior.
> He knew it completely. The glow, the solus. And it became the motion of the sea, the ship sailing morningward toward the sun. (216)

For Bill these are the final series of phrases that he calls "the uninventable poetry, inside the pain, of what people say." Opposing the uninventable to invention returns the reader to a moment earlier in *Mao II* when Bill is reflecting on writing fiction:

> I remember the names of all those players, the positions they played, their spots in the batting order. I do batting orders in my head all the time. And I've been trying to write toward that kind of innocence ever since. The pure game of making up. You sit

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> there suspended in a pure clarity of invention. There's no separation between you and the players and the room and the field. Everything is seamless and transparent. And it's completely spontaneous. It's the lost game of self, without doubt and fear. (46)

The writing of innocence and the "pure clarity of invention" are once again interrogated by DeLillo, even when this seems to endanger a powerful mode of novel writing. The "lost game of self," the sort of game that the cult played, is once again a temptation. But Bill's final solace requires the return of the uninventable, the language of ordinary life.

Tap's "novel," which closes *The Names,* seems to write toward that same kind of innocence of pure clarity. But what it finally affirms is, in the phrase that concludes both books, "the fallen wonder of the world" (339). That fallen wonder is the context of James's last vision, too. Before the final text from Tap's novel, the last moments of James's narration take place at the Parthenon:

> People come through the gateway, people in streams and clusters, in mass assemblies. No one seems to be alone. This is a place to enter in crowds, seek company and talk. Everyone is talking. I move past the scaffolding and walk down the steps, hearing one language after another, rich, harsh, mysterious, strong. This is what we bring to the temple, not prayer or chant or slaughtered rams. Our offering is language. (331)

For some critics, this final association of language with God or the gods suggests that DeLillo is still thinking of language in a mystical, transcendent register. Cowart suggests that this offering is a "medium of exchange with eternity" (166), and that Axton here "stands before the definitive assemblage of theoglossal signs" (167). Osteen argues that language as oblation is language as magic. I want to suggest, however, that the pentecostal moment, the original experience of glossolalia, is resisted in this scene. The scene recalls the Book of Acts, where there is also a great crowd of people from different nations. In Acts, tongues of fire descend upon the Galileans and all the persons of different nationalities hear their native language spoken. In contrast, in DeLillo's scene, the plurality of tongues is not unified. The people Axton sees are not seeking a transcendent form of communication. They are already talking. They are there in order to talk. Dissociated from prayer or chant, language is no longer mystical—but it is still mysterious. For DeLillo, to bring language to the temple, to make

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it our offering, is to confess its adequate insufficiency. For an offering, like a slaughtered ram, involves both an admission of brokenness and an expression of gratitude. The fact that it is a sacrifice means that all is not perfect with language. But as a sacrificial offering it is a form of praise. Moreover, because the structure of language is a structure of value, "praise has and needs no measure other than the realization of one's desire to say what one means and to mean what one says to other speakers about the topic of our conversation, whatever that might be" (Mulhall, 109). Just so, when James Axton sees that language is our offering, he suggests that merely to "seek company and talk" is a form of praise. It flows from a sense of wonder over our ordinary life with language.

Notes

1. The gesture that opposes the ordinary is what Cavell calls skepticism. In *The Names* this skepticism has a mystical aspect, and its renunciation of the ordinary compels a quest for states of increased purity. Cavell commends a "quest for the ordinary," but he recognizes that skepticism is itself a characteristic of "ordinary" human life:

> Skepticism is a place, perhaps the central secular place, in which the human wish to deny the condition of human existence is expressed; and so long as the denial is essential to what we think of as the human, skepticism cannot, or must not, be denied. (*Quest* 5)

Just so, DeLillo recognizes that the imperative to purify language or push it to its boundaries is in one sense a part of the "ordinary" human experience with language, yet he is also concerned to return it to its "ordinary" habitation.

2. Wittgenstein has also written:

> The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation:* it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement now is now in danger of becoming empty.—We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground! (107)

Wittgenstein is suggesting that what we need to change is not language but our sense of what is required. Slipperiness has been created not by the nature of the object of investigation but the nature of our expectations. Wittgenstein

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continues, "The *preconceived idea* of crystalline purity can only be removed by turning our whole examination round (One might say: the axis of reference of our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need.)" (108). I want to suggest that *The Names* works to reconceive that "real need." It takes us back to the "rough ground" and affirms it even in its roughness, because it is where we can "walk."

3. So, for instance, though I find Paul Maltby's criticism of DeLillo's "romantic metaphysics" provocative, I do not believe that the "novel suggests that the visionary power of language will only be restored when we 'tap' into its primal or pristine forms" (263). And while it is true that "the novel follows the lives of characters who seek to recover" the "utopian condition of language" (262), I think Maltby overlooks the novel's skepticism toward precisely this project, which is troubled, at the very least, by the fact that it is associated with a cult that arbitrarily murders people. Moreover, since the cult is interested in both transcendence and terrorism, I think the novel thus cultivates a suspicion (tempered by sympathy) toward affective states characterized by transcendence and mysticism. I am very much in agreement with Amy Hungerford that the significance of conversation (small talk) is at the heart of *The Names,* and I agree that such conversation has a ritual or liturgical character. However, Hungerford retains the vocabulary of *mysticism* and *transcendence* to describe what happens there, whereas I would argue that, while the habits and repetitions that constitute everyday practices certainly have a liturgical quality, the mystery retained in the novel's return to the ordinary is not properly described as either mystical or transcendent. Those words are more appropriate to the interests of the cult. DeLillo said in an interview with Anthony DeCurtis that his work had always been "informed by mystery," but that this meant "mystery in general rather than the occult" ("Outsider" 55). If the language of mysticism can be retained, I would argue, it is not a mysticism characterized by the approach to limit states or the dissolution of the senses but by the startling *thatness* of everyday experience. And if the language of transcendence is admitted, it must yield to Marianne Moore's strictures: "[E]xistence / is flawed; transcendence, conditional" (215).

4. Cavell ends his essay, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary" by noting that marriage is the place where the return to the ordinary becomes a sort of covenant:

> Marriage [in Hollywood comedies of remarriage] is being presented as an estate meant not as a distraction from the pain of constructing happiness from a helpless, absent world, but as the scene in which the chance for happiness is shown as the mutual acknowledgement of separateness, in which the prospect is not for the passing of years (until

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> death parts us) but for the willing repetition of days, willingness for the everyday (until our minds become unreadable to one another).
> (*Quest* 178)

5. For Stephen Mulhall, one of the most acute contemporary interpreters of Cavell, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, language's very structure is a disclosure of what matters to us. The world's "availability to us" (101) through grammar is occasioned by the fact that we value things; its availability to us is thus by definition a "species of appraisal or appreciation." His argument is fashioned out of Wittgenstein's scattered reflections:

> [All] philosophical investigations are grammatical—they take the form of reminders about the kinds of things we say about phenomena; and [Wittgenstein] claims not only that "grammar tells what kind of object anything is" [570]—hence that it gives expression to the essence of things—but also that our concepts (and hence their grammar) "are the expression of our interest." In other words, the criteria in terms of which objects count for us (as objects of a specific kind) also make manifest which distinctions and differences matter to us; hence to grasp the grammar of a word is at once to grasp how and why we discriminate. Here is one sense in which one might claim that judgments of fact and judgments of value hang together—more precisely, that agreement in judgments, as manifest in our criterial attunements, is an agreement in valuing. It would seem to follow that even the communication of a fact is dependent on an agreement in evaluation, rather than the other way around. (Mulhall 101)

Therefore, Mulhall claims, to reflect on our use of language is simultaneously to reflect on what we value:

> To remind us of the grammar of our words just is to remind us that, and how, we appraise the world—it is to recall us to our vocation as appreciators of reality; it invites us to take responsibility for—to be responsive to—the true worth of our interlocutors, their locutions, and the objects of those locutions. (101–02)

This logic is true of language in *The Names:* attention to it just is attention to "our vocation as appreciators of reality."

6. I owe this insight to one of the readers for *Twentieth-Century Literature.*

7. Examples abound. James with Kathryn: "It appeared to be nothing, bedtime once more, her pillowed head in fifty watts, except that these particulars, man standing, pages turning, the details repeated almost nightly, began to take on mysterious force" (81).

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8. The erosion of this distinction between the cult and the charismatic congregation seems important to the evaluation of glossolalia in the novel. Mark Osteen is one of several critics who suggest that glossolalia is a renovating force in the novel, an instance of language that is fundamentally communal and opposed to the textual tyranny—the precision of letters and spelling—that so intoxicates the cult and Brademas. He sees the free spelling in Tap's novel as parallel to the freedom glossolalia provides; it is indeed a textualization of glossolalia (137–41). Tap's freedom with spelling is, of course, opposed to the cult's obsession with epigraphic precision. But it seems to me that glossolalia in the novel is still a danger. That Owen's attraction to the project of the cult is an attempt to attain what was denied him in the experience of tongues suggests that the practice of glossolalia and the cult's project are similar in intention and expectation. Tap's retelling of Owen's story ends with an expulsion—there is nothing fundamentally communal here, no attentiveness to the "cry for pity" that James hears at the end of the novel. Speaking in tongues does not recover the paradise lost in the expulsion; it is actually a repetition of the expulsion itself. There is only what Owen himself calls the "absence" characterizing that beautiful gibberish (307). What Tap does to Owen's story is to make him a complex object of pity—to come to understand him again in language, as James says of his own narrative at the end: "These are among the people I've tried to know twice, the second time in memory and language" (329). I think DeLillo is suggesting that this is the work of novels as such. Tap's novel does not imitate but replaces the aspirations of glossolalia: the latter is a mode of transcending understanding, the former a work of knowing better, knowing twice.

9. Wittgenstein famously insisted that a private language was impossible: it would even be unintelligible to its creator because he would be unable to consistently assign meanings to the signs he invented (89–95).

10. As David Cowart writes, Owen's preoccupation with the priority of the inscription of letters and characters on stone is a kind of Derridean insight about the "paradoxical anteriority of writing to speech. Derrida, one recalls, deconstructs the notion of writing as unnatural supplement to speech. . . . Derrida shows that all language is writing" (168). What Cowart doesn't say is that the novel's concern with the centrality of embodiment operates as a kind of defense of Plato's insistence that embodied voice and speech *are* prior to writing—precisely what Derrida objects to in his critique of the *Phaedrus* (61–171). Socrates's major complaints about writing are that it lacks interaction and disembodies speakers and hearers. This is the heart of the connection between what seem to be Socrates's otherwise discrete speeches on rhetoric and love—language requires an incarnate relation of love to achieve its full

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ontological capacity. For an excellent defense of this reading of the *Phaedrus,* see John Durham Peters (36–51). For a similar reading from the standpoint of theology and liturgy, see Catherine Pickstock.

11. Mark Osteen's *American Magic and Dread* is a brilliant account of the way "magic" serves as the antidote to "dread" in the various worlds of DeLillo's novels. This magic is defined as a mystical pursuit of purity; characters seek "solace in purgative rituals" (20). Osteen is also sensitive to the ways that, in the novels, "the pursuit of such perfect structures paves the way to fascism." This tendency is certainly true of the cult in *The Names.* Yet Osteen claims that in *The Names,* "Dread gives way to magic: obliteration yields to oblation in the practice of glossolalia, which is presented as a gift that restores community and relieves the pressure of history" (5). It seems to me that one of the central interpretive stumbling blocks of *The Names* is deciding how DeLillo wants us to think about magic after associating it with murder. Osteen writes that in this novel "language is the magic that defuses dread" (119), but it seems to me that James Axton must renounce the magical properties of language, must desacralize them, in order to properly receive and employ language as the fabric of ordinary life.

12. Percy's account is nicely exemplified in the early interaction between James and Tap concerning the referents of Mackintoshes, Wellingtons, and Ingersolls. It is precisely the publicly affirmed and mediated status of these names that gives them power for Tap (9–10).

13. The irony, of course, is that Singh is a "talking machine," craving absent conversation yet only able to simulate it in the presence of an interlocutor he generally ignores.

14. For insight into Tap's many moments of education, which are often accomplished through a dictionary-like instruction in terms, see Cavell's fascinating argument in *Must We Mean What We Say?* about what happens when we look up a word in a dictionary. We discover, Cavell insists, both what a thing is and what the word means. It is impossible to isolate word from world, naming from being. The very process of "learning" is "a matter of aligning language and the world" (19–20).

15. The return of one's voice to one's body recalls the disturbing scene in which James "seduces" Janet Ruffing after watching her amateur belly dance. It may be objected that the character whose insights are the central source for this essay is both a patsy for the CIA and a man whose sexual aggression toward Janet comes very close to rape. One slightly unsatisfactory way to deal with this problem is to make a distinction between James Axton the narrator

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and James Axton the character. As in most of the scenes in the novel, James the narrator is hovering above the scene and mustering insights that would be unavailable to James the character. These insights include moments of oblique sympathy for Janet as he describes his own disturbing behavior. But I think another way to understand this scene is that it marks the moment in which James's mentality most closely approaches that of the cult. When he says to her, "Use *names*" (228; DeLillo's emphasis), there is a haunting quality that returns the reader to James's recent encounter with the cult and his discovery of the words painted on the rock: *Ta Onómata*. He tells Janet, "There's a lack of connection between your words and the physical action they describe, the parts of the body they describe. This is what draws me to you so intensely. I want to put your voice back inside your body, where it belongs" (228). Here James, like the cult, wants to engineer, through an act of will, a perfect connection between speech and physical act. Though the interest in the embodied voice is, I think, actually antithetical to the cult's philosophy of language, the desire here to usher in a linguistic utopia—and the correlative refusal to acknowledge that ordinary language is imperfect—is cultish.

16. Compare to Vosdanik in *The Names:* "If you will know the correct order of letters, you make a world, you make creation" (152).

17. For an account (and criticism) of modernity's romance with the idea of a pure, universal, mathematical language, from Leibniz to Frege, Russell, and Carnap, see Stephen Toulmin's *Cosmopolis.*

18. In an interview with Tom LeClair, DeLillo insisted: "Specialized languages can be very beautiful. Mysterious and precise at the same time. . . . Mathematics and astronomy are full of beautiful nomenclature" (84).

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Reviews

Modernism, Dead or Alive

Modernism: The Lure of Heresy
by Peter Gay
New York: W. W. Norton, 2007. 610 pages

Robert Boyers

The word *modernism* no longer calls to mind a simple singular aesthetic or a particular set of ideas. To think about what it means is to ask: Whose modernism? What kind? When? Barnett Newman and others of his generation believed that modern art is not about beauty or retinal gratification, but this was by no means the view of Virginia Woolf or Henri Matisse. Marcel Duchamp regarded the habit of distinguishing between good and bad taste as ridiculous. But no such animus inspired the practice of modernist writers and artists like Thomas Mann or Giorgio Morandi. The poet-critic Randall Jarrell could praise the modernist poems of William Carlos Williams for their "freshness and humor" and "fantasy" (82), yet also celebrate the "passion for philosophy" and "order" (78) in the modernist masterpieces of Wallace Stevens. W. H. Auden saw no reason to refrain from introducing politics into his work, but other modernist writers were reluctant—often on principle—to do so.

If *modernism* is not the name of a practice or a set of principles, it also no longer signifies a particular era. In his new book, Peter Gay operates on the assumption that nineteenth-century writers like Baudelaire and Dostoyevsky were modernists, and he contends that modernism is a phenomenon that comes and goes, dying out for a time and starting up again, as it did in the middle of the twentieth century with the galvanizing appearance of works by Jackson Pollock, Gunter Grass, and other "modernist" artists. To suppose that *modernism* is the name of a coherent movement that began and ended in the first 40 or 50 years of the last century seems no longer possible for most cultural historians.

Of course the term itself continues to suggest a number of identifiable features, however various the works in which these features are ostensi-

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bly embodied. A novel lacking in self-consciousness or any discernable preoccupation with form would not qualify as a modernist work, even if it appeared in the 1920s or 30s when Joyce, Proust, Faulkner, and others were defining the parameters of modernist fiction. We may admire the work of a painter like Lucian Freud and acknowledge the freshness, originality, and power of his portraiture, but we do not regard him as a modernist artist, so little does he seem to strain against the limits of the painter's available resources, so relatively straightforward do his intentions seem. Straightforward in what sense? In the sense that he is not, or does not seem to be, principally interested in questions about his medium or troubled by the relation of his work to the standard high-modernist masterpieces that dominated the period in which he came of age. We expect genuine modernist works to entertain such preoccupations and to be in some degree "experimental"—that is, to be asking themselves at every turn what they are doing and thinking about the limits and possibilities peculiar to their medium. When in *Madame Bovary* Flaubert briefly interrupts his narrative to reflect on the linguistic resources available to him as a novelist and complains of their inadequacy, he seems to us to be self-conscious in the way of the modernist, however much his work confirms in other respects his status as a realist writer. The preoccupation with form and medium will vary in emphasis and intensity from one modernist to another, but where it is entirely absent, the writer will inevitably belong to some other dispensation.

Is this kind of preoccupation a good thing? Obviously, the commitment to the experimental, like the habit of self-consciousness, is not bound to produce masterpieces. The annals of modernism are filled with tenth-rate "experiments" and pretentious, stultifyingly tedious, ostentatiously self-conscious works. But modernism was, at its best, a bracing idea. It seemed, for a time, the enemy of complacency in art and thought. It challenged the established canons of good taste and tested, by example, the belief that to a considerable degree realism was an exhausted idiom. It also made untenable the notion that success in art had much to do with popular acceptance, transparency of purpose, proper sentiments, or verisimilitude. Though particular modernist works could seem unduly tendentious or needlessly obscure or obstinately resistant to the elementary satisfactions offered by more accessible works of art, the modernist revolution did surely inspire several generations of artists and their audiences to think seriously about the values only to be found in art and to try not to confuse them with values to be found elsewhere.

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Peter Gay's study of modernism is primarily a series of case studies, portraits of major modernists from Henry James to Franz Kafka, from Virginia Woolf and Picasso to Frank Lloyd Wright and Sergei Eisenstein. Each figure is, obviously, exemplary in a distinctive way, and it would be hopeless to suppose that a careful examination of Kafka will somehow reveal what we most want to know about Woolf or Joyce or Proust. Gay contends, in effect, that each of those he selects for his book is "indispensable" (xix) and concedes that there are others—Faulkner, Poulenc, De Kooning—whom he omits but may well be indispensable as well; but when he goes on to argue that "a single aesthetic mindset" (3) informs the work of the leading modernists or that they share a common set of feelings and opinions, we are not in the least persuaded. Even to say that the modernists were committed to "a principled self-scrutiny" (4) is to say more than the facts of this very complex case allow. Self-consciousness is not always principled, and it is impossible to imagine Jackson Pollock or Picasso subscribing to an aesthetic or an ethics that relies in any way on principles. In fact, in his biography of Picasso, John Richardson treats several of the leading modernists as artists principally committed to surfaces rather than to searching explorations of their own psyche (passim).

When modernism was first discussed as a more or less identifiable if not quite coherent phenomenon, interest was fueled by the outrage and incomprehension that often greeted the appearance of a new work. The howls of dismay sounded at the initial performance of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* became at once a signal feature of the legend of modernism. Joyce's *Ulysses* was early celebrated in part because it was felt to be "too much," and many were inclined to think well of its successor, *Finnegan's Wake,* in spite of the fact that they had no desire to wrestle with it. In fact, the frequent, loudly sounded expressions of outrage and incomprehension allowed modernist artists and their celebrants to mock the philistine, stiff-necked middle classes who early disdained Joyce and Picasso and others who seemed to "ordinary" people needlessly committed to difficulty. The success of modernism, its growing command of an era and of the artistic protocols that defined that era for sophisticated people, had much to do with the perception that, in this case, the success was hard-won, the enemies of modernism entrenched and unwilling to embrace the new. When Randall Jarrell wrote about "the obscurity of the modern poet" (3) he reminded his readers that earlier poets and critics, long before the advent of modernism, had once inspired cries of incomprehension from

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their first audiences and had since come to seem anything but difficult. But the modernists often made a virtue of their "obscurity" and declared, in effect, that they were decidedly not in the business of providing pleasure or edification. In fact, they wished—many of them, at any rate—to provoke and displease and to make art for an advanced minority uniquely equipped and disposed to struggle with unfamiliar, even offensive or off-putting works of art. And of course the audience for modernist art grew as more and more people wished to think themselves advanced and open to the shock of the new.

In 1961 Lionel Trilling published "On the Teaching of Modern Literature," an essay in which he considered problems generated by the widespread acceptance of modernism. It had been accepted, after all, as a source of accredited masterpieces and as an ethos that had renewed a culture otherwise unfortunately invested in the conventional, the safe, the traditional. That, at least, had more and more come to be the accepted wisdom on modernism. In the university, teachers were eager to share their passion for the difficult and the dangerous, and students were primed to submit to a canon recently enlarged to accommodate not only cubism and abstract expressionism but the varieties of decadence and nihilism to be found in the work of artists as various as Celine and Beckett. Gay identifies at the root of the modernist sensibility what he calls "the lure of heresy" (4), and Trilling too believed that it was the extraordinary seductiveness of the subversive that chiefly accounted for the sometimes frightening intensity of modernist writing.

What, then, was the problem? If readers, teachers, and students were primed to embrace the new and challenging, where would there be grounds for complaint? Trilling argued that students were in no way inclined to resist the destabilizing insights they encountered in modernist literature. Asked by their instructors to follow Mann or Kafka or Lawrence to the lip of the abyss, students would gaily look down and feel duly edified by their enlarging encounter with the creatures of the night. What had been outrageous, unassimilable, and disturbing had gradually become safe, so that Trilling could refer quite pointedly to "the acculturation of the anti-cultural . . . the legitimation of the subversive" (qtd. in Krupnick 145). The consequence was, in pedagogic terms, an invitation to students to collude, as it were, in the domestication of modern literature, which had rapidly became a standard academic subject, no more unsettling than any other object of study.

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It is possible, of course, that Trilling exaggerated something that was, all the same, in the process of coming to pass. There is, in many recent tributes to the modernist imagination, a nostalgia for a time when an exhibition of surrealist paintings or the mere sight of a urinal mounted on a pedestal might inspire heartfelt revulsion or incomprehension. Anyone who has spent a weekend in New York City strolling from one gallery to another in the Chelsea art district will attest to the fact that those who belong to what Harold Rosenberg once called "the herd of independent minds" (qtd. in Bloom 145) are today turned off by nothing. What passes for appreciation in the wake of modernism is a bland receptivity. In the present climate, perfectly forecast by Trilling in an essay that has not dated at all, authentic responses to original art are hard to come by, and few are inclined to differentiate between the genuine and the specious in works that aim to be "provocative." Ezra Pound's injunction "Make it new" has been taken as the primary criterion of value by persons for whom an inspiring emblem of audacity and newness is a shark suspended in a room-size tank of formaldehyde. For such a museumgoer, neither Gregor Samsa nor *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* is apt to seem thrilling or appalling.

Peter Gay is not especially troubled by these developments in the culture, and he chooses Duchamp as "the truly indispensable icon" (160) for the history of modernism, quoting Robert Motherwell's description of him as "the great 'Saboteur'" (Gay 167). The centrality of Duchamp does now seem to most of us indisputable. If he was, in many ways, a destructive figure, and produced little if any first-rate work of his own, he did nevertheless exert enormous influence on the art of the last 100 years, and it is clear that much of the brashness we associate with the term *avant-garde* is owed to his example. Duchamp was a rigorous thinker. Those who have followed in his wake are, with few exceptions, neither rigorous nor original. Many of the complaints leveled at Duchamp are philistine, the expression of a disdain for anything that says no to conventional standards of beauty or decorum. But the refusal of most people associated with the visual arts in the last half-century to say no to the sophomoric nose-thumbing and posturing that today passes for "avant-garde" is the expression of a fear to be thought traditionalist or philistine. There is nothing wrong with efforts to distinguish between Duchamp's generally negligible achievement as an artist and his efforts to subvert the whole idea of art as a special or exalted realm. But it is something else to underrate the audacity and brilliance of Duchamp's critical enterprise

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simply because he has inspired several generations of untalented hacks.

Duchamp's example surely reminds us—insofar as we need reminding—that the destructive modernism he championed was far removed from the efforts of artists like T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Georges Braque, artists who were committed to an aesthetic ideal of perfection and were by no means turned off by the notion that art made legitimate and decidedly special claims on our attention. The term *art for art's sake* was always more than a bit misleading, but the derisory modernism that led Duchamp to draw a moustache on the *Mona Lisa* was hardly a typical aspect of the phenomenon that gave us Eliot's "Four Quartets" and the Mark Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas. George Orwell, who had little use for the avant-garde, saw in James Joyce not merely an unusually "daring" writer and "elephantine pedant" but "a kind of poet": "When you read certain passages in *Ulysses,*" Orwell wrote, "you feel that Joyce's mind and your mind are one . . . that there exists some world outside time and space in which you and he are together" (213). At its best, Orwell understood, the modernism of Joyce and other great artists was not a matter of posturing or of "mere verbiage" or "technique" but a way of getting at things never quite captured before: "States of consciousness, dream, reverie," in fact, "a special vision of life" (228).

To be sure, as Orwell also noted, in many of the best works of modernism "There is no attention to the urgent problems of the moment, above all no politics in the narrower sense" (229). Many commentators have noted that during the Nazi occupation of his country Pierre Bonnard continued to paint as he had painted before, as if nothing remarkable or alarming had occurred. At the same time, critics of modernism often noted that a great many of the leading figures were "reactionaries" (Harrison) if not outright fascists, communists, anti-Semites, or racists. The controversy that erupted with the awarding of the 1947 Bollingen Prize for poetry to Ezra Pound had much do with the "scandal" that a leading modernist writer who had—in his Pisan Cantos—actually bothered to pay attention to the politics of his moment and to throw in his lot with the fascists could nevertheless win the approval of a jury of his high-modernist peers.

In truth, though we know that there are grounds for regarding Pound as a fascist, and Celine as a virulent anti-Semite, and Neruda as an unrepentant Stalinist, and Yeats as a sometimes besotted Irish nationalist, and Wyndham Lewis as a reactionary, we do correctly think of modernism

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as a tendency in the arts that has no necessary or predictable relation to politics. Modernism, after all, took shape principally as an interrogation or repudiation of entrenched artistic values. As a current of feeling, it had little patience for merely prudential considerations. But politics, even radical politics, has much to do with calculation, with problems and alliances and mobilizations. It is not typically an occupation for loners and underground men, people for whom political activity will seem a prospect more suited to credulous partisans. The political allegiances of leading modernist artists rarely made it into their best work, which was neither hortatory nor, in any narrow sense, useful. We do not celebrate Picasso because for a time he took himself to be a committed communist, and there is nothing in Yeats's political poems that is strident or didactic or programmatic.

Most modernist artists ridiculed those who supposed that art existed to change the world. Stevens asserted that the artist has no "sociological or political obligation" (qtd. in Oates 83). Wilde declared all art "quite useless" (1), and Nabokov spoke of the artist as essentially a "great enchanter" (5). In her essay "Art and Ethics" Joyce Carol Oates notes: "'If I had a message,' Ernest Hemingway is said to have said, 'I would send a telegram'" (76). She also cites the Stephen Dedalus of *A Portrait of the Artist*, who declared "I will not serve" (77). Gay notes that for Baudelaire, beauty was not to be found "in the glamour of politics and war" (37).

In fact, Gay goes out of his way in this new book to support the view that there is no clear correlation between political views and artistic tendencies, rightly observing that the modernists were a motley crew whose views ranged from the reactionary hatred of the masses exemplified by Arnold Schoenberg to the left-wing radicalism of Sartre and others associated with the influential French journal *Les Temps Modernes*. Most of what Gay has to say on these matters is by now thoroughly familiar, though for those without any knowledge at all of intellectual and cultural history, it will no doubt be useful to learn that for existentialists like Sartre, "The individual is condemned to be free" (Gay 451), or that for playwrights associated with the theater of the absurd, the key words were "futility" and "miscommunication," or that totalitarian regimes did not take kindly to modernist experimentation. To read Gay's book is to be impressed by his range and the orderliness of mind that is everywhere apparent. But really his book should be appreciated as a readable textbook perfectly suited for background assignment in an introductory college course on modernism.

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Often, in fact, as Gay expertly summarizes the critical consensus on a particular artist, he will seem hasty, superficial. Rightly he tells us that there is no consensus on Kafka beyond the view that he is an essential modernist figure. But then he cites, in passing, "The Penal Colony," remarking that, like Kafka's work in general, it is marked by a style "unruffled and precise" (216). From this he draws, again merely in passing, the conclusion that "Kafka does not seem to have been made anxious by the terrifying situations and doomed characters he invents" and that this was apparent even in works like "The Metamorphosis." More, according to Gay, "an essential ingredient in Modernism, the burrowing after deeper emotional realities, seems to be largely absent, in fact, unequivocally excluded, from Kafka's writing." Alas, this is but a single instance of something one often finds in Gay's book. Where he is not content merely to summarize or describe but wishes to offer an opinion or a judgment, he is unwilling to support his reading by looking carefully at the work he cites. There may be numerous competing interpretations of the "The Metamorphosis" to choose from, and several of them, though incompatible, may well seem legitimate. But to suggest that often in such a work there is no "burrowing after deeper emotional realities" is nonsense. The "unruffled" flatness of Kafka's delivery in no way prevents him from "burrowing," and the works cited by Gay are all in various ways heartbreaking precisely because they open up "emotional realities" and unassuaged spiritual longings that are—or ought to be—impossible to miss.

One further example of Gay's provocative but unsatisfactory efforts, here and there, to offer a fresh perspective on a familiar subject is his account of modernist painting as dominated by portraiture. To make this case Gay selects for special attention Max Beckmann, who indeed painted a great many self-portraits and, as Gay notes, "characterized himself as immersed in the problem of the individual" (129). From this Gay asks us to accept that modernist painters in general were in the business of making "a great confession," and that this "was true even, indeed especially, of major modernists who turned their back on representation altogether." No doubt such a sweeping claim can be supported by invoking the work of artists who, like Beckmann, were drawn to self-portraiture, or very different kinds of artists whose work may be said to have been records of the inner life and thus, in a way impossible to define, implicit self-representations. But to read the works of action painters or geometric abstractionists in this way is, finally, neither helpful nor accurate. Sure, Picasso's protean

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drive, his need to master a whole succession of styles and to be constantly on the move from one mode to another, may be said to express him. Picasso did indeed suggest, as Gay reminds us, "that he wanted to leave to posterity as complete a documentation of his life as he could muster" (152). But Picasso's work is not in any essential way illuminated by regarding it as somehow a part of a modernist "great confession"—not unless the word *confession* is taken to refer to everything that may conceivably be observed and felt in an artist's work. By that token, every work of art, of every style and period, might be said to belong to that same enterprise, to be the expression of interests, drives, reluctances, tastes that taken together constitute a portrait of the individual maker. Such a perspective would then serve not at all to differentiate modernist art from any other kind of art.

No doubt there will always be people around to tell us that, at bottom, one thing is much like another, and that the reason it is so hard to come up with a satisfactory, comprehensive definition of modernism is that there is no such thing as a modernism distinct from every other dispensation. Critics studying Wallace Stevens will rightly note that, for all his singularity, his project often resembled—again, "at bottom"—the project of William Wordsworth. This modern figure or that will sometimes be distinguished as a "belated" romantic or a neoclassicist "at heart." But Gay proceeds as if the effort to understand a distinctive phenomenon known as modernism would seem transparently valuable, and so it seems to me as well, however little I am persuaded by Gay's readings and conclusions. To be sure, the epithet *modern* has long been used to designate works or ideas that seem unconventional, to break unmistakably from the dominant tradition. The poet-critic J.V. Cunningham long ago noted that

> the modern poets in Roman antiquity were Caldus and Catullus, who wrote in new and untraditional poetic forms . . . borrowed from another language and regarded by the traditionalists of the times as effete and decadent; whose subjects were novel and daring; and whose attitudes were in conscious distinction from those of the old morality. (351–52)

From this and other examples, Cunningham is inclined to conclude that "to be modern depends on a tradition to be different from, upon the firm existence of customary expectations to be disappointed" (352). In time, of course, everything loses "its quality of newness," as Cunningham

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says, and it is often the case that what had seemed dangerous or decadent or impossibly difficult will come to seem dominant, established, even traditional. Modernism was, for a long time, "in secure possession of the field," and if the great modernists now no longer "represent to the young writer" or artist what they did 50 years ago—that is, "the new, the adventurous, the avant-garde," this is a fact of cultural history that should not seem at all surprising.

And yet there is in modernism certain qualities—let us call them spiritual qualities—that would seem, in their way, to persist, even to prevail, if only as a reminder to us of all that art can be and mean. The subtitle of Gay's book, "the lure of heresy," captures an aspect of an essential oppositional posture that characteristically informs the modernist imagination. But Cunningham is more precise in getting at the heart of the matter. "For it is the condition of modernity in art," he writes,

> that it appeal to the initiate, that it provoke the opposition of the ordinary reader. . . . Hence it has . . . its private ritual and its air of priesthood—odi profanum vulgus et arceo, "I despise the uninitiated crowd, and I keep them at a distance." It is obscure, and its obscurities are largely calculated; it is intended to be impenetrable to the vulgar . . . to exasperate them. (352–53)

Lest we suppose, moreover, that the phenomenon Cunningham describes is merely an expression of a presumptuous disdain for the multitude characteristic of a relative handful of artists, he goes on to note that "there is something of this in all art that is genuine. For the genuine in art is that which attains distinction, and the distinguished is uncommon and not accessible to the many." When a species of art that had seemed difficult and disturbing starts to seem easy, when distinction is lost in commonness and the audience "becomes satisfied with a customary response" to customary works that look or sound advanced without at all seeming impenetrable or exasperating, then artists will have to look for new ways to create a genuine newness. Thus the need for the modern in art will always, presumably, be with us, even if we are bound much of the time to mistake "difference for distinction."

Conceived in this way, modernism was an expression of a recurring tendency in the arts, but it was also unique in its ability to make of the oppositional, the difficult, the excessively outré, a dominant force in the culture of the West. No other movement in the arts made the disdain

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for the accessible, the useful, the popular, the politically correct or commercially viable, a signal feature of its high ambition and its quest for distinction. Modernist artists could be narrow or omnivorous, abstract or representational, playful or sober, apparently detached and impersonal or openly emotional to the point of violence. But authentically modernist works can never be slack or lazy, can never aim merely to excite visual or literary bliss or to satisfy formulaic appetites for prepackaged, safely "advanced" experiences that confirm viewers or readers in nothing but the sense that they are in the know. The modernists were, of course, in varying degrees, irreverent and avidly committed to newness, but artists who now claim to be their successors, those who take themselves to be advanced, are in the main shallow and proceed with full confidence that their audience will always be eager to be pleasured by whatever mild shocks or puerile outrages they can provide for them. To think about the fate of what looks like, but is by no means to be confused with, the modernist imagination, one need only study the works and the fabulously successful career of a hard-working art-world entrepreneur like Richard Prince. There we see how the brashness and irreverence and difficulty of authentically modernist art has by now given way to the work of a quintessentially "new," ostensibly advanced artist aptly described by the current *New Yorker* art critic as "an adept of juvenile sarcasm" (Schjeldahl 92). If nothing else, Peter Gay's new book should remind us of what we have lost.

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Above and Beyond

Apartheid and Beyond:
South African Writers and the Politics of Place
by Rita Barnard
New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. 234 pages

Helen Kapstein

Rita Barnard's new book goes far beyond her initial sketch of it "as an effort to articulate the impact of apartheid on literary and cultural production" (3). It is a comprehensive survey of South African literature of the apartheid years and immediately after, and it provides us with a formulation of the politics of place (per her subtitle) that not only illuminates the South African situation but also contributes enormously to conversations about "the reassertion of the spatial in critical social theory" (5).

Barnard, originally from South Africa and now a professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, opens with an introduction that provides the traditional chapter overview but then disarms us with her candor about her own position as an expatriate academic. Having initiated a discussion about "the situatedness of textual production and consumption" (3), Barnard situates herself and, in doing so, neatly squashes any objections to her authority and makes manifest the personal nature of this academic endeavor:

> Of course, my telling of this story involves something of a myth of origins. But I tell it as a way of suggesting the extent to which this book is one replete with personal emotions—with a desire to finally understand the country I have often despaired for and even hated, as well a yearning for a new country, full of fresh political, cultural, and experiential possibilities. . . . I can only hope that this book does something to demonstrate my conviction that the long-distance view might be a productive one to adopt in a world where the local may not be erased . . . but where it is increasingly penetrated and shaped by influences and interests from far away. (14)

Barnard starts with a chapter on J. M. Coetzee's writing that uses the

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spatial concept of the "dream topography" to explore the "ethical and political dimensions of Coetzee's novels" (26). This is followed by two chapters on Nadine Gordimer's stories and novels: "Leaving the House of the White Race," which traces Gordimer's "time-honored strategy of ungrounding any notion of domestic normality" (69), and "Of Trespassers and Trash," which uses Michel de Certeau's idea of a "proper place" from *The Practice of Everyday Life* to talk about dispossession (being out of place), resistance, and restitution. Chapter 4, "A Man's Scenery," tries to complicate the voguish conception of Athol Fugard as old-fashioned and sentimental by paying closer attention to his concern with spatial deprivation. Whereas in the Gordimer and Fugard chapters Barnard covers much of their writings, in her Miriam Tlali chapter, "Beyond the Tyranny of Place," she reads a single novel, *Muriel at Metropolitan,* framing it with analyses of Mamphela Ramphele's study of migrant hostels, *A Bed Called Home,* and Fatima Dike's play *So What's New?* in order to highlight Tlali's reclamation of space within a tyranny of place. Barnard ends with a chapter on two Zakes Mda novels:

> *Ways of Dying* and *The Heart of Redness* . . . map out the location of culture in postapartheid South Africa: they enable a meditation on the transformation of the country's cultural geography from the old landscapes of oppression to the new mediascapes of leisure and tourism, which have often subsumed the old sites of deprivation in a new logic of display. (150)

The book's ostensible structure moves us from author to author and text to text. Its deeper drive, however, has to do with the interpenetrations of discursive and social structures, so that Barnard uses the texts to illuminate historical, political, and economic realities and vice versa. All of this is done through the lens of space and place, producing an interdisciplinary set of readings that focuses the literature in sharp new ways. For instance, wrapping up an analysis of Gordimer's novel *July's People,* Barnard writes of the character Maureen Smales:

> Painful as it may be, it is surely necessary for her to confront these connections and to abandon apartheid's distorted map of human relations; a map that, as we have seen, extended no further than the suburban garden, and was deceptive even about that which its fences enclosed. The much-debated final scene

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> of the novel is, then, profoundly ambiguous but not altogether hopeless. Maureen runs toward the sound of a mysterious helicopter, lured, we are told, by the illusory promise of "a kitchen, a house just the other side of the next tree" (*JP* 160). In this regard her running is a retreat. But it is also true that her dash toward the helicopter dissolves all of her old attachments. . . . The novel thus eschews any final (en)closure and seems to affirm an open-ended, transient, and migratory existence, a mode of being that is perhaps peculiarly African and also (as has been argued) typically postcolonial. (65–66)

In this passage we can see an example of Barnard's interest in working with questions of space on multiple levels and her particular attention to the "micropolitics of space" (121)—like the space of the suburban garden—as a counterbalance to the reach and scope of national, capitalist, and global spatial constructs. We also see her deftness in moving from the textual specifics of characterization, narration, and genre (she is happy to put familiar categories to new uses) to bigger claims. The book is regularly punctuated by such confident moves, which add up to a total (but not totalizing) theory of South African spatial relations.

Barnard provides us with equally lucid introductions to both the literature and the theory she employs, which comprises an eclectic but pertinent mix of literary, geographical, anthropological, and other criticism. This ranges from Virginia Woolf on sensory insulation to Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope to the idea of multidimensional space in Ramphele's *A Bed Called Home: Life in the Migrant Hostels of Cape Town*. Fairly exhaustive in its references, the book finds its bearings in a triangulation of social and cultural theory, literary criticism, and South African studies. Without being derivative, *Apartheid and Beyond* is a natural successor to earlier investigations of South African social and textual space like Kate Darian-Smith, Liz Gunner, and Sarah Nuttall's *Text, Theory, Space: Land, Literature, and History in South Africa and Australia* and Hilton Judin and Ivan Vladislavic's *Blank _____: Architecture, Apartheid, and After.*

What makes Barnard's contribution original is her unwillingness to let any assumption go unexamined, so that while she draws freely on existing theories she often presses them past their initial implications. Thus one critic's "stable opposition between public and private, between character and landscape . . . needs to be problematized" and another's "tendency

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to equate the idea of 'place' with 'landscape' leads her to ignore . . . sociospatial relations" (182n7). The fullness of Barnard's book comes from this reluctance to forge easy equivalences or oppositions and from the fact that she takes her time walking us through text and theory before drawing conclusions. This allows us to make the connections alongside her rather than being handed an interpretive inevitability. Putting together Ramphele's theoretical framework with Tlali's novel *Muriel at Metropolitan,* for example, we get this:

> *Muriel at Metropolitan* enables us to examine all of the dimensions of space outlined in Ramphele's useful study. The impact of physical space on social life can be traced in the novel's microanalysis of a single workspace and also in its less frequent, but nevertheless insightful, reflections on South Africa's emergent urban geographies and on the national territory at large. The dynamics of psychosocial space can be explored in the novel's revealing conversations about radios and furniture and its attention to black consumers' creative forms of self-invention, especially in the domestic sphere. The effects of political-economic space—a wholly confining terrain for black South Africans during the period in question—are explored in the novel's treatment of the complex relationships between the capitalist marketplace and the oppressive racial legislation of apartheid. The importance of intellectual space, finally, is evidenced in the novel's detailed examination of the various forms of linguistic inclusion and exclusion in which all the characters engage. It is ultimately best demonstrated in the novel itself, which . . . is itself a means of expanding critical awareness and (potentially at least) of fostering the black readership's capacity for taking a panoramic view, making comparisons, and identifying the sources of their oppression.
>
> (139–40)

As this shows, Barnard sees liberatory qualities in the literature, reading it hopefully for "real empowerment and enhanced intellectual space" (146). Generally speaking, her attitude of cautious optimism lends itself to the overall discussion, since it reflects a larger endeavor to open up spaces for productive questioning, but there is a single falsely redemptive note when Barnard suggests that the category of black South African women "will, of course, become increasingly useless as the experience of South

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Africa's citizens cease to be defined by the racial essentialisms of the past" (142)—an optimism that does not seem justifiable in light of the persistence of race as a social determinant.

Having said that, I did wish for a concluding chapter in which to pursue more fully the anticipatory promise of some of Barnard's observations, such as her meditation on Mda's *The Heart of Redness:*

> Mda's novel of the millennium thus seems poised between an acceptance of a kind of postmodern nomadism—of a world of exiles, tourists, and migrants—and a desire to recover a sense of local belonging and indigeneity in a way that is utterly characteristic of the postcolony in an age of globalization. Mda, it seems fair to say, derives his novelistic energies precisely from what [Njabulo] Ndebele describes as the "split personality" of the new nation, a condition that, he predicts, is likely to generate its own forms of creativity. (174)

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DeLillo's Evolution

Beyond Grief and Nothing: A Reading of Don DeLillo
by Joseph Dewey
Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006. 172 pages

Mark Osteen

The title of this compact and generally helpful study comes, by way of Jean-Luc Godard's film *Breathless,* from William Faulkner's *Wild Palms,* where Harry Wilbourne is given a choice between "grief and nothing" and chooses grief. According to Joseph Dewey, this is the binary around which Don DeLillo's novels and plays rotate. One doubts that this formula applies to most of DeLillo's texts, especially since, as Dewey himself notes, DeLillo resists the "disturbing dilemma" predicated by the choice between "sorrow and irony" (12). Indeed, as if aware of the inaptness of this premise, Dewey redefines *grief* as he proceeds: in a discussion of *End Zone,* it is "the terror and wonder, mayhem and splendor of the unmediated now" (32); in *Great Jones Street* it is "the very mystery and compelling magic of the authentic" (35). Of the possible umbrella terms for these ideas, *grief* would seem far down the list.

The book's opening pages succinctly stake out the territory and state Dewey's primary aim: to provide an introduction to DeLillo aimed at a "new generation of serious readers of fiction" (5) who seek a less "rarified" level of argument than that found in previous critical studies. Although the bulk of the introduction sounds a bit too much like a book proposal and contains too many of the impossible-to-prove claims endemic to the form—for example, that DeLillo has never been an "embraced novelist" (3), whatever that means, and that his reputation has been "entirely" (4) sustained by academia (why, then, are his novels other than *White Noise* so little taught?)—nevertheless, *Beyond Grief and Nothing* is in many ways an excellent introductory guide to DeLillo. Written in muscular (if at times too jam-packed) prose, the book's chapters crisply delineate the texts' major themes.

But Dewey's second aim—to give a reading—interferes somewhat with this one. No mere introducer, Dewey intends to trace an "arc of evolution" (5) in DeLillo's oeuvre away from the cool satire of the early

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novels toward a radiant confirmation of spirituality in the later DeLillo. To do so, he breaks the author's career into three parts subtended by five kinds of narrative: the Street, which contains "Narratives of Retreat" and "Failed Engagement"; the Word, which is characterized by "Narratives of Recovery" and "Redemption"; and the Soul, which incorporates late "Parables of Resurrection." This is an elegant set of guidelines, but Dewey sometimes strains the texts to fit them and is too prone to present DeLillo's texts as arguments (see for example 8, 17, 25, 79) rather than as narratives; thus he tends to pin these complex texts to one-dimensional positions about the media or consumerism or terrorism, thereby imposing upon them sometimes ill-fitting places in his "arc of evolution." In what possible sense, for example, does *The Engineer of Moonlight,* DeLillo's first play—a rather arcane and unactable exercise—issue from the Street? Does *Ratner's Star,* surely one of the most recondite and forbidding novels of the last 40 years, have anything to do with the Street? Is *Mao II* really about redemption?

But despite the questionable aptness of these terms, the analyses themselves are usually pithy, sharp, and original. Dewey's treatments of the early novels—still much less read and appreciated than the 1980s and 90s books that solidified DeLillo's reputation—are particularly fresh and reliable. He also displays a gift for epigrammatic phrasing that (when it doesn't lapse into glibness) can be striking: for example, in the contrast between Bucky Wunderlick's neighbors in *Great Jones Street*—the hack writer Eddie Fenig and the severely disabled Micklewhite boy—he discerns two hazardous positions for the language artist: "form without emotion or emotion without form" (37). Accurately describing these early novels as narratives of retreat, Dewey suggests that the alternatives left for their protagonists are skimpy enough to seem afterthoughts, so that they appear to "concede to the attractive stillness of emotional paralysis, each committing a sort of suicide in self-defense, in gestures of flight that promise only dead-end isolation and anxiety" (48).

The "Narratives of Failed Engagement" (*Players, Running Dog, Amazons,* and *Engineer of Moonlight*) again prompt questions about Dewey's rubrics: isn't *End Zone* also about failed engagement? Isn't Pammy Wynant's trajectory in *Players* a retreat? Dewey himself admits that there's little distinction here: discussing *Running Dog,* he writes that Glen Selvy's "apparent engagement is another DeLilloesque variation on retreat" (58). Still, this is one of the book's strongest sections: Dewey's reading of *Players*

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(one of the few treatments of this chilly little study in yuppie anomie) is especially persuasive, partly because it actually fits the "grief and nothing" paradigm. This section also offers some memorable apothegms, such as these lines about the Wynants: "They dabble in risk, they play at vulnerability, they experiment with connection, they tease mortality" (56). Dewey's dissection of *Running Dog* is nearly as good, and he is surely right that these racy but off-putting novels leave little for readers to love. The chapter ends with a suitably light-hearted endorsement of *Amazons*—DeLillo's pseudonymous collaborative novel, and one he has disowned—that also makes a strong case for its inclusion in his canon.

According to Dewey, DeLillo reached a terminal point by 1980, and *The Names,* the fruit of his months in the Mediterranean, reveals a new seriousness and reach. Though Dewey may overemphasize the degree to which this novel marks a break (James Axton is also a failure at engaging, a retreater, a would-be ascetic), Dewey reads this underappreciated novel assiduously, aptly pointing out its relative warmth and concluding with a powerful summation of its pivotal role in the DeLillo oeuvre and its embrace of narrative as an aesthetic system. Yet his reading of its conclusion—an excerpt from a novel by Axton's precocious nine-year-old son Tap—seems muddled: after dubiously claiming that Tap's writing is "clumsy and messy rather than inventive," he charges it with "restricting access to only the most patient and creative readers" (78). As written, this is incoherent (surely he meant "allowing" access); even when corrected, it's debatable. There is less new in his analysis of *White Noise;* this text has been more thoroughly mined than DeLillo's other novels. But here too Dewey's gloss on the novel's conclusion seems eccentric. He wants Jack Gladney to be "recovered" at the end, but "resigned" would be closer to the truth.

In "Narratives of Redemption" Dewey attends superbly to *Libra*'s multiple layers of irony and its qualified affirmations of "the exercise of speculation itself . . . the agency of invention, in short . . . the imagination's central position in a media age" (102). Here he does not try to pound a text's irregular shape into a round hole. But his take on *Mao II* is less persuasive, in large part because he insists on reading this sardonic novel as a tale of redemption. To do so he must mount a desperate (and unconvincing) claim that Bill Gray's death is not an ignominious fadeout but a kind of triumph, the "heroic revival" (112) of Willard Skansey (Gray's "real" name). And in claiming that DeLillo inveighs against visual media

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as offering mere "destructive simplifications of the open lens" (113), he ignores the photos DeLillo places within the novel, an authorial gesture that challenges such reflexive dismissals.

He does better with *Underworld,* and compellingly demonstrates how this massive novel both invites and frustrates system building, seeming to allow all connections even as it exposes the perils of system building. This novel, he suggests, turns readers into waste managers (like protagonist Nick Shay) who must constantly "recycle" evidence drawn both from the text and from our own experience. He then presents an intriguing analysis of Shay and Sister Edgar that resists pressing the text's multiplicities into single strands and instead elucidates how "despair and hope, anxiety and comedy, horror and irony" are as complementary as Bobby Thomson and Ralph Branca, the hero and sad sack spotlighted in the novel's opening set piece (122). This section is a passionately written, even inspiring, celebration of DeLillo's achievement.

The final section, "The Soul," marks a fall-off. Here Dewey aims to prove that DeLillo has only lately displayed a reach for spiritual transcendence. But such yearning also underlies the quasi-ascetic regimens of early characters such as Gary Harkness and Bucky Wunderlick. And in general this chapter, perhaps because it is less anchored to the work of previous critics, offers a number of questionable theses. For example, Dewey implies that Lauren Hartke's visitation by Mr. Tuttle and her subsequent performance art in *The Body Artist* are essentially irrelevant to her capacity to cope with her husband's sudden death. But why would DeLillo spend 95 percent of this brief novel on inessential episodes? Indeed, if any of his texts dramatize a choice between grief and nothing, this would be the one. Dewey argues that Lauren's various personae—the roles she plays in her work—impede her reclamation of a "true" self. But it's difficult to imagine that a novelist who is also a playwright would accept this simplification; indeed, DeLillo shows repeatedly that it is through role-playing, ventriloquism, and masks that artists—like many other postmodern human beings—perpetually make and unmake their identities. What Lauren ultimately discovers is not her old self but the possibility of a new one built from the fragments of her earlier personae. Far from an "elegant affirmation of the failure of art" (133), as Dewey insists, this novel is DeLillo's most focused analysis of the artistic process and his most thorough affirmation of its necessity.

Dewey is on even shakier ground with the much-maligned *Cosmopo-*

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lis. Though he's certainly right that the novel works neither as character study, social satire, nor high-tech financial thriller, he again wrenches it out of shape to make it fit his thesis. He wants to show that Eric Packer, the novel's supercapitalist protagonist, attains a kind of resurrection—even transfiguration—in the split-second lapse between his bodily death and its forecast on his watch screen. But the text clearly states that Packer's "pain interfere[s] with his immortality" (*Cosmopolis* 207), and that he comes "to know himself, untranslatably, through his pain": in short, Packer achieves only awareness of mortality. The novel, that is, portrays the persistence of bodily reality—Packer can't buy eternal life—as his gradual stripping exposes him as a poor, bare, forked animal.

Although we can chalk up some of my objections to ordinary interpretive disagreements, *Beyond Grief and Nothing* remains more successful as an introduction than as a reading. Alas, a few nagging factual errors also reduce its reliability as an introduction: for example, *Great Jones Street*'s Watney is misnamed "Watley" (39); Billy Twillig, protagonist of *Ratner's Star,* is given the misnomer "Terwillinger" (43) instead of his real name, Terwilliger; Jack Gladney's daughter Bee is said to be a passenger on the plane that nearly crashes in *White Noise* (85) when in fact it's another plane entirely; and Denise is not Jack's daughter, as Dewey claims (87), but Babette's. The University of South Carolina Press also deserves a stern reprimand for jumbling the endnotes in chapter 3.

Despite these missteps and the book's sometimes clashing aims, there is a great deal to like and admire in it: energetic, graceful prose; an unabashed delight in words that may help jaded professors remember why they entered this field; eloquent endorsements of even the weakest of these texts; an admirable attempt to make of this writer's oeuvre a coherent narrative. *Beyond Grief and Nothing* is an intelligent, concise introduction that also offers a wealth of provocative interpretations. In impelling one to return to DeLillo's work, it fulfills the most essential requirement of good criticism.

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